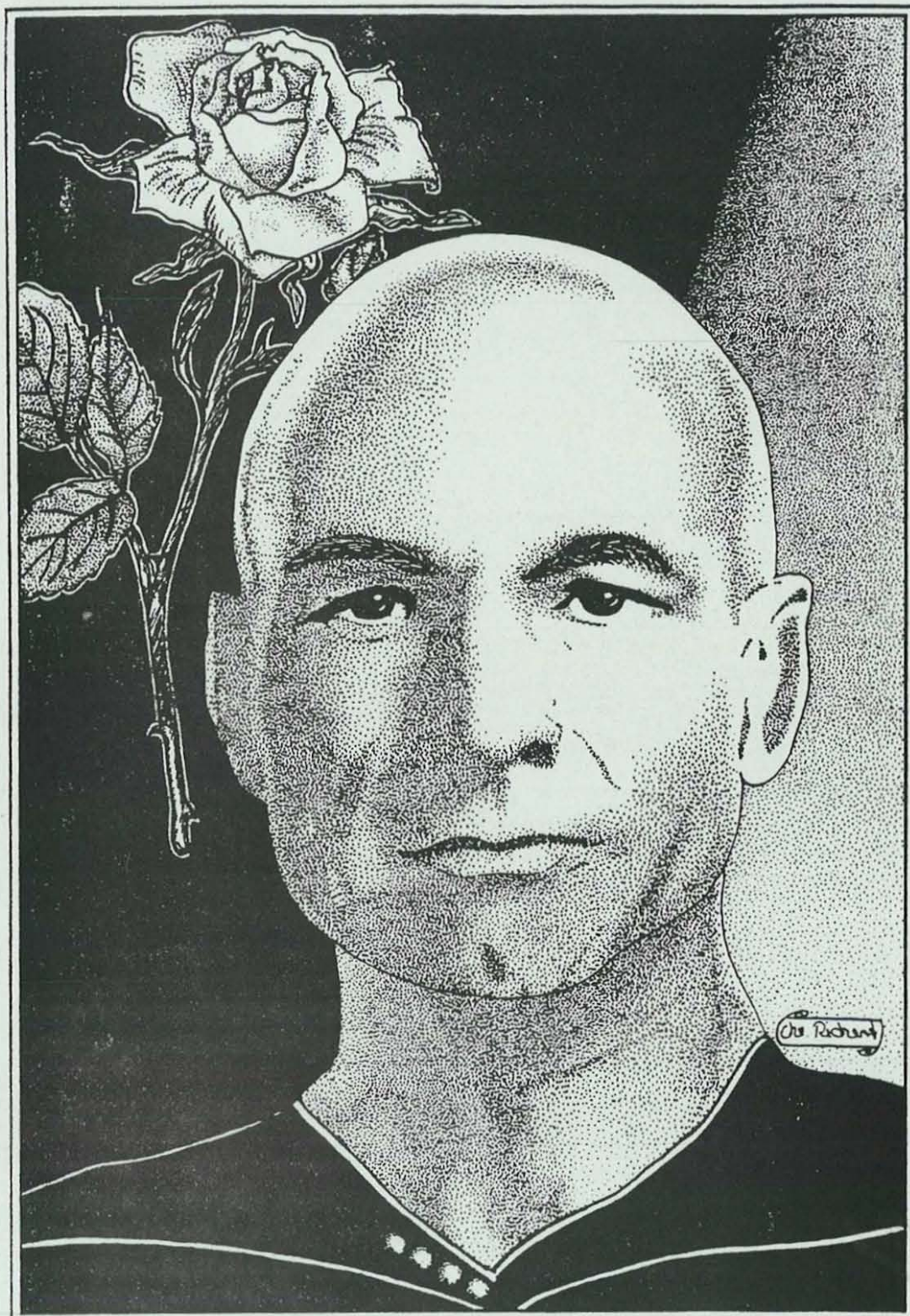


ShoTpress

MAKE IT SO 14



*a Star Trek
fanzine*

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INQUEST ON A FINAL MISSION

by

P.J.Poole

"Court of inquiry will now resume, Captain Tatiana Postikov presiding. All present be seated, please."

As the Starfleet Marine Sergeant completed his formal announcement and people took their seats after the lunchtime recess, Ensign Wesley Crusher tried again to define his opinions of the USS Lenin's commanding officer. She was short, barely minimum height for admission surely, her gray-silver hair swept back into a tight bun, her face lined with years, her eyes as blue and cold as polar ice. This was no gentle grandmother figure - she seemed instead to be a primal force condensed to Human size and shape, then turned loose on an unsuspecting universe. Worf had described her as 'formidable' with a 'commendable reputation for discipline and achievement' when he had learned that Wesley was to take passage on board the Lenin on his way to the Academy. Right now, Wesley would gladly have changed places with Worf, or anyone on board the Enterprise. Instead, his empty stomach clenched as Postikov began to speak.

"So. To recap facts from this morning, Captain Picard of Enterprise, Captain Durgo of Salanite Mining Consortium 733 and yourself, Ensign Wesley Crusher, were shipwrecked on moon of Pentarus III after engine failure on Durgo's ship. You took shelter in cave system, apparently containing an artefact of alien origin, Picard was injured and command of party was passed to you. Shortly thereafter, Durgo was killed by the artefact. Subsequently you deactivated said artefact and were then rescued by search team from Enterprise. Correct?"

"Uhh... Yes, Ma'am," said Wesley.

"Good. As there is no disputing of sequence of events, we are left only with problem of assessing the responsibility of yourself for the death of civilian Durgo. Your statement, and that of Picard, states that Durgo had been imbibing intoxicant substance 'dreski' - was Durgo drunk when he refused to obey your orders not to attack the artefact?"

Wesley glanced at Chandler, Lenin's Counselor and his defence representative at the hearing, but there was nothing Chandler could say at this point.

"No, Captain. He had been drinking, but seemed unaffected by it. He just wouldn't take any notice when I told him to wait before trying to get around the guardian system."

"Personally I have always found phaser set on light stun to be good way of making civilians take notice. However, you further testify that Durgo had phaser in his hand ready to attack the artefact and told you, 'You had better do your part'. Did you construe this as a threat to yourself should you not cooperate?"

For a second the temptation was there for Wesley to take refuge in the possible defence she offered, but innate honesty came to the fore.

"No, ma'am. We were arguing, but there was no explicit threat at that time. He fired, the guardian attacked, I took cover, heard his screams and then he was dead, killed by the

silenum fibres."

Postikov sat back in her chair at the head of the table, and steepled her hands in front of her. She gave a sigh and scowled at the other people in the room.

"Mr Crusher, I have reviewed your record on the Enterprise, and there can be no doubts that you are most intelligent and inventive young man. On several occasions you have saved the lives of some or indeed all of your crewmates. There is also no doubt that Captain Picard, for reasons best known to himself, has given you great latitude to develop and express yourself on board his ship, not always with the most desirable results. I cite examples of Nanite infestation of Enterprise, and of an occurrence when you used research laboratories on board starship to create anti-matter as part of school project! Anti-matter!!" Postikov paused at this point, and shook her head in apparent disbelief before continuing.

"Captain Picard saw fit to appoint you as Acting Ensign and then to field commission you as full Ensign, despite your youth and lack of formal Academy training, and it is not my place to question his judgement, however imprudent I feel it to be, but at this point you are a problem to me. A situation occurred in which a civilian died under Starfleet jurisdiction. If you were a regular Ensign, particularly one of my crew, I would press charges and expect you to be expelled from the service. As it stands, I do not believe that you had received proper training for the command responsibility that was thrust upon you, and your poor performance in the circumstances was due to that lack of preparation. It is also my own experience that there is no limit to the degree of stupidity that can be expected from civilians in times of crisis. You will receive an official note of censure on your record, Mr Crusher, plus ten demerits to your academic records, which should make your arrival at the Academy somewhat less than triumphant. You will however be able to learn from your errors, which puts you considerably ahead of Captain Durgo. Do you have any comments?"

The snap in her voice suggested to Wesley that any comment was liable to be taken as a challenge to personal combat, so his immediate response came out sounding almost like a startled bleat.

"No, ma'am. Uhh, thank you, ma'am."

"Hmmm. You are welcome. Recorder off, court is adjourned, all hands dismissed. Chandler, you will join me please in my quarters."

Wesley was still trying to come to terms with the rapid fire resolution of the hearing as the briefing room doors hissed shut behind the ramrod stiff departing back of Captain Postikov. Counselor Chandler smiled, shrugged slightly, patted him on the shoulder and set off in hot pursuit of the Captain, leaving Wesley to watch the Marine Sergeant type in the commands to seal the court record and then begin to clear away the formal trappings of the hearing.

Wesley was still trying to resolve his feelings twelve hours later as he lay in the darkness of the four berth cabin he shared with the other junior ensigns on board. Sandyha and Sven were on aftershift, so there was only the rhythmic snoring of Asura to be interrupted by the alarm klaxon.

"All hands, all hands, Battle Stations alert, condition red!"

Red flashing emergency lights were swamped by the main room light as Asura sprang

from his cot, grabbed boots and tunic and headed for the door at a dead run, seemingly oozing into the clothes as he moved.

"We mark two Cardassian destroyers, Goron class, attacking. Phaser and Photon crews, standby. We have decompression on deck 5 and 6, sectors E1 through E5; Sickbay, prepare to treat blast and radiation injuries." Postikov's voice sounded cool and detached as it came from the speakers.

There had been no impact, no warning shudder, and the Lenin seemed to be still in warp... Wesley's confusion soared towards panic.

"Asura, what the hell's...?"

"Stay here!" yelled his erstwhile room mate as he dashed out the door.

"Like hell," muttered Wesley, groping for pants and boots, then issuing a stronger curse as lights, both main and red alert, blanked out.

"Intruders on decks 7 and 2, Marine squads Able and Baker engage, tactical commands from Major Anson on TacFreq 7, squads Charlie and Delta muster in full space armour in cargo three, prepare to board and seize enemy vessel. Tac-com from Lt. Stonn on TF3, drop is in eighty three seconds from mark, stat." Postikov now sounded more like an angry iceberg than ever, but Wesley's mind was so busy tackling the new situational data that her tone scarcely registered.

Intruders? Whilst still in warp, and with shields raised as they must be for an engagement? Impossible, and he would swear they were still in warp!

"Computer, query ship's status. Are we still under warp drive?"

"Unauthorised access denied at this time."

Intruders. The only way that Wesley could see for anyone to board a ship in warp was by dimensial shift transporters like those used by the terrorist group that had once captured his mother and the Captain. If that were the case, then by fluctuating the ship's field it should be possible to...

"Crusher to Bridge. Captain, I think I know how the intruders are getting here. We can - "

"Postikov." The voice sounded ominous as only that voice could sound. "Mr Crusher, I am sure that your theory is most interesting. I look forward to discussing it after we complete this drill, but until then you will please clear this channel. Immediately. Out."

Drill. As in exercise. Wesley let his head fall into his hands, and prayed devoutly for a squad of Cardassian marauders to burst into the room and blast him to atoms. Somehow it seemed an infinitely more attractive prospect than any discussion he might have with Lenin's commander after this night's work...

It was three days later that the other shoe was finally dropped. Wesley had spent one day girding himself for a Captain's summons that never came, and one day trying to decide if being ignored or forgotten was better than being carpeted again, before his decision today to

just get on with business as usual, looking forward to tomorrow's arrival at Starbase 98 and his transfer to the USS White Hart for the final leg of his voyage to Earth... and the Academy!

He was, therefore, quite enjoying himself at a rear table in the Officers Rec-room, listening unobserved to a Marine Lieutenant debate with the ship's aftershift helmsman about the merits of their respective branches of the service when Postikov walked in and helped herself to a drink from the auto vendor. Every other occupant of the room seemed quite unperturbed to have the Captain amongst them, but Wesley began to plot a course for the exit that would keep him as far from the woman as possible.

She moved amongst them, murmuring a comment to one man, smiling and making a hand gesture at another that made him blush, then reminded the helmsman of a time he had nearly plotted the ship's course disastrously wrongly and the Marine of a time he had turned out in full battle armour but with insufficient charge in his manoeuvring batteries...

"...and you left me stuck to the shuttle's hull for the full three hours!" he finished the story for her, laughter and embarrassment vying for pride of place on his face.

Postikov clapped him on the back and moved on, then her eyes made contact with Wesley's. He started, realising that he had been so captivated by watching the woman that he had let slip his chance to escape. She approached, and sat opposite him.

"So, Mr. Crusher. And how are you today?"

"Uhm, I'm fine thank you, Captain, but if you'll excuse me I have to - "

"Sit," she said, with a palm downward gesture that returned Wesley to his seat like a lapful of neutronium.

"You will find that I do not actually bite young officers, unless offered considerably more provocation than you have managed so far."

Not particularly reassured by what he assumed was the Captain's idea of a joke, Wesley took a deep breath and plunged in where angels would not have dared.

"I'd like to explain about the other night, Captain. You see, I thought..."

She waved him silent, and sighed deeply as she regarded him for a moment.

"You thought the attack was real, you thought that you could assist, and - in all honesty - you thought that fate had handed you the chance to prove your worthiness and redeem yourself after the poor showing you made on Pentarus III, correct?"

Not trusting his voice, Wesley simply nodded once, after a second's hesitation.

Postikov sighed again then leaned forward and spoke intently.

"You will find that life is not often so willing to offer up opportunities for the neat resolution of situations you find unsatisfactory." Then in a more conversational tone, she added, "How do you find our recreational facilities, by comparison with, say, the Enterprise's Ten-Forward?"

Caught off balance again, Wesley struggled for a diplomatic reply, but Postikov resumed speaking before he was able to think of anything not too damning to say.

"We are perhaps a little more functional, a little less luxurious than Jean-Luc's starfaring showpiece, eh?"

She waved her hand for silence again as Wesley opened his mouth to defend his former home.

"Please, I intend no insult to the name of Enterprise, indeed, my grandfather served on NCC-1701 and on 1701-A, plus one of my aunts was Captain of Enterprise C for several years. I do not dispute role of Federation flagship in important annals of Federation history. But neither do I forget that other ships in fleet perform equally vital functions, just in less... prestigious... fashion."

Wesley's puzzlement must have been obvious to see, because Postikov continued her explanation.

"It is only correct that Enterprise, as flagship, should undertake diplomatic and high profile missions, and should be presented as epitome of Federation ideals concerning exploration and peaceful co-existence with other races, but do not forget that price of high ideals is usually paid in blood and sweat to defend those ideals. Jean-Luc Picard served his time in Starfleet before he received command of Enterprise and freedom to pursue his first, best destiny as explorer, but on Stargazer and before, he faced enemy fire from Tholians, Cardassians and others, and paid the price thereof."

"My father paid the price as well," said Wesley quietly.

"So I am aware. Your father died, Picard lives with that, and with every other death he caused, or allowed, or was powerless to prevent. That is price every command officer pays for command - to be ready to die, or kill, as part of duties we have sworn to uphold."

For a second, Wesley remembered Riker, in charge of the Enterprise, ordering lethal fire on the Borg ship carrying his Captain, and later ordering Wesley to execute a suicide run at that same menacing cube of destruction.

"I have served 42 years in Starfleet, and have no regrets. I have sent men to their deaths too many times to recall in my time on the Cardassian borders and will almost certainly have to do so again before I retire, but I would choose no other life for myself if I could." Postikov's bleak voice pulled Wesley back to the present. "Old Russian proverb: 'It's a dirty job but somebody's got to do it.'" She rose to leave the table, then turned and spoke gently to the young man.

"But I do not believe that it is one you should undertake. Your feelings about your father, and the effects of having a man such as Picard for a role model are understandable, but we live in a totally unforgiving and uncompromising universe, where one lapse in judgement can leave you, or people around you, just as dead, dead, dead, as the late lamented Captain Durgo. I believe you have the fine intelligence and vision to succeed in a career in Starfleet and to make an outstanding Engineering or Science officer, but I do not believe that you should take Command School, or ever aspire to Captain's position. It is not for you."

Wesley wanted to argue, to find words to express how wrong he thought she was, but by the time he had formulated a reply she was already at the door, and the chance to seize the opportunity had passed him by again.

He never saw Postikov again, and it was many years before he learned whether she had been right or wrong about him, and by then he was fully aware that not all lessons are taught

in academies, and that not all lessons are pleasant.



REMEMBERING Q

by

Michael Crouch

Q sat nonchalantly within the limitless confines of his own continuum.

He watched the iridescent orange glow flow and ebb around him and let its rhythmic pulse restore his sanity to its former heights. His most recent involvement with the Human race had taken more out of him than he had bargained for.

To think that he, an omnipotent, should be transformed into the lowest of species and become like them! The shame of having to convince Picard of his quandary, of maybe having to accept that that was all he was ever going to be henceforth.

But he had been noble. He had won back his entry ticket into the Q continuum. He was back, and no-one was going to forget it.

Q thought briefly of all the things he had done, the places he had visited, the events he had seen. Then there were all the people, the creatures, the 'its' that he had met, and he remembered them all. The countless races he had upset, toyed with, caused suffering to.

He remembered all the seeds of distrust he had sown, the misery he had inflicted, the great fear he had been responsible for, and he wondered. *Had* he gone too far? Had he really been wrong to have committed these things? Had he interfered with too many lives?

He smiled momentarily and the answer came to him.

No!

There were many more lives to play with, greater terrors waiting to be unleashed, and he smiled again.

"You're going soft," Q told himself, inwardly ticking himself off for even contemplating these things. Then he smiled a third time, because far within that ego, deep down within that omnipotent heart, he knew what he truly was.

A thoroughly rotten sod!



SURPRISE SURPRISE

by

Bonnie Holmyard

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Counselor Troi has suggested that the command crew spend the occasional evening together under circumstances other than those affiliated with duty, in an attempt to combat the unacknowledged yet very real stress associated with command. The following is the second in a series of short stories depicting the command crew's informal get-togethers, told entirely from the point of view of this evening's host.

"If you will all occupy a transport, I will explain what I have planned this evening," Worf said as soon as the command crew had entered the holodeck.

Synchronously, three things happened. The holodeck doors closed, instantly blending into the surroundings, and humidity wrapped its muggy arms around those who stood inside. Worf caught Picard's raised brow of intrigue as the Captain's eyes slid to his First Officer. The Klingon's followed. He saw Riker's shrug, his fleeting smile, and then watched as the tall First Officer stepped over the rotted remains of a huge fallen tree that blocked his path. Dr. Crusher and Counselor Troi stood as if transfixed. Their eyes were all that moved. Data stood between the two women, his pale yellow eyes, like theirs, open wide to the scene around them. Only La Forge spoke as he nimbly jumped the log Riker had so carefully side-stepped. However...

"Wow!" was all Geordi said.

Worf knew the Chief Engineer referred to the overgrowth of plants of every shape, colour and size that surrounded them. It was a virtual jungle. The prominence of green in every shade imaginable was invaded, sporadically, by vibrant slashes of colours. Reds, blues, yellows, oranges; all shouted the presence of exotic flowers, some looking as enticing as others looked dangerous, all fragrant and sweet.

There was no wind, not a lick of a breeze. Steam wafted up through the tall, imposing, and (by the size of their massive trunks) century-old trees that dominated the area. The misty dampness clashed with the smouldering heat that hung over the leafy canopy above. Fingers of light somehow sliced down through the haze. Sunbeams danced in streaks between the fronds of the lush green ferns that all but camouflaged the stately giants of the jungle. And vines, an over-abundance of vines, as thick as a man's arm and festooned with bright emerald leaves, criss-crossed the fragrant steaming foliage. Birds sang out sharply, cutting through the perpetual hum of insects. Somewhere far off a primate chattered, continuously, harshly and angrily. The ominous shriek of a wild cat sounded and left no doubt in anyone's mind; this was a jungle.

Worf stood in the middle of this tropical foliation circled by six transparent transports, their circular surfaces broken only by their access ports. The transports were one of the many holodeck observation features, and were used generally for outdoor programmes. They allowed their occupants to float above the activity below, to move at will from point to point, and to do so without interfering in the scene being watched. Because the transports were not part of the programme, they and their occupants did not exist in the reality of the programme.

Once activated, they would quite simply disappear.

The Klingon, dressed in Starfleet uniform, stood at ease, in direct contrast with his emotions. He was ready for battle, and knew he faced two. Already the adrenalin was launching through his body in anticipation. If he could provoke Picard into allowing him his way, he would battle the Adversary With No Name. Every cell in Worf's being screamed for the challenge. He had taken bold steps in preparation for this confrontation. He was about to take even bolder.

Silently, he motioned for his comrades to do as he'd asked and occupy a transport. As each person stepped into a unit and sat, the access port through which they had stepped closed to a slit. The bubbles started to rise, coming to a hovering halt at eye level with Worf's head.

"I have decided," he began, "to entertain you tonight in true Klingon fashion. I intend to battle one of the most fierce of Klingon enemies." He paused, his eyes sweeping the jungle around him. "You may wonder at my choice of setting," he went on subjectively. "Plant life such as this has never drawn life on the harshness of my home planet. I will say only, it serves my purpose."

His eyes locked on Picard's and he took a deep breath. "I have over-ridden the holodeck's life-safety feature," he stated warily. He saw the instant disapproval cross the Captain's features. "You, sir," he was quick to say, "can reverse my decision and stop this programme at any time. I ask that you do not."

"Explain your request," Picard commanded, "and your decision."

Worf withstood the urge to simply state the obvious: he was Klingon, it was his right to fight his enemy to the death. That answer, however, would not get him what he wanted, and he knew it. This evening provided him the opportunity of fighting one of the Klingons' most ancient enemies, with honour, before witnesses. Even if it was just a holographic simulation, with the life-safety feature eliminated he could believe it was real. He had faced many dilemmas, both personal and judicial, in deciding to go through with this programme; he had crossed many points of no return; but once decided, Worf foresaw every obstacle, every contingency. Still, everything depended on his being able to bend Picard's rigid sense of duty.

"I ask that you bear with me," he answered, and continued only after Picard's silent nod of consent. "I intend, through this programme, to introduce to you, Starfleet, and the Federation, an alien as yet unknown to all." He saw intrigue again light Picard's eyes.

"I do not know my enemy's name," Worf said, and paused. "No one does. I do not know from where my enemy comes. Again, no one does. I do know, however, he is real. He and his kind have been furtively preying on my people, and probably many other species throughout the universe, for eons." Again, he paused.

"In the annals of Klingon history, as far back as records have been kept, there have appeared unexplainable accounts of loss of life. A life here, a life there, but sometimes the loss of entire squadrons of warriors on patrol. Not an easy feat," he felt compelled to point out. "Sometimes bodies were found, sometimes not. The atrocities committed on those found were simply that, atrocities, even by Klingon standards of torture. In all cases no one ever stepped forward to claim the honour of the kill. There was no honour involved."

"Are you saying it was this alien race that did this your people?" It was Commander Riker who asked.

"That is correct," Worf answered.

"How is it the Klingon High Council has not shared this knowledge with the Federation?" Picard asked.

"Foreknowledge is not a weapon," Worf answered, and totally out of character, shrugged his shoulders. "What good would it have been for the High Council to pass on the knowledge of one dying Klingon?" He let the question hang in the air, purposely, before explaining.

"One survivor alone lived long enough to speak of the enemy he had confronted," Worf stated simply. "When each Klingon reaches the Age of Ascension he or she is told the words of this dying brother-in-arms. Each then vows on his or her honour as a warrior to stalk and kill this unknown enemy, an enemy we call the Adversary With No name."

Again, Worf paused. He was not used to making speeches. He had already said more than he usually ever said at one time, and he had only just begun. But he was fired with purpose, a purpose he was determined to see satisfied. He took a deep breath and went on.

"I have not made the death of this unknown enemy my sole purpose in life," he admitted. "Others, much greater than I, have tried and failed. Our enemy leaves no evidence of his presence, no scent of a trail to follow. He comes in stealth, invisible unless he wants you to see his form, and stalks all who hold a weapon. He lives for the thrill of the hunt, and comes prepared. He will not be captured, willingly self-destructing before allowing his prey knowledge of his species. Diplomacy is a tool he does not acknowledge, unless it can be used in the hunt. He is shrewd, cunning, the ultimate hunter, a predator - and I mean to stalk him now."

"If he is so much of an unknown, how can you simulate his appearance?" Again it was Riker who asked.

Worf hesitated before answering. "I have already said too much," he said pointedly. "When each warrior makes his vow to stalk and kill this unknown adversary, he also takes an oath of secrecy. I have broken that pledge by saying what I have. I will not reveal the words of my dying brother-in-arms."

"If this enemy is invisible, as you say, how will you see him? How will we?" This time it was Geordi who spoke.

"I must amend that statement," Worf answered. "He is not entirely invisible. The cloaking device he uses bends light. He merges with his surroundings, the disruption barely visible, but when he moves the disruption moves with him. However, he moves with lightning speed. Both you, as observers, and I, as his prey, will have to be ever alert to catch sight of him. Your VISOR may allow you to see him even when he's cloaked. That is only a guess, but I will rely on my inherent sense of smell. Believe me, I will find him, and expose him."

"You intend to battle such an enemy as you stand now, with your bare hands?" It was the Doctor who asked, probably thinking of how she would repair the damage.

"No," Worf answered. "I will wear what he wears. It may confuse him."

"Does that mean you too will be invisible?" Troi asked.

"No," Worf answered. "I could use the cloaking device he employs, but that would

defeat the purpose of this scenario."

"And just what is that purpose, Lieutenant?" the Captain asked.

Worf did not hesitate. "My oath as a Starfleet officer to honour the doctrine of Starfleet and the Federation does not allow me to kill wantonly. As much as I intend to uphold that pledge, so I must stand by my Age of Ascension vow. Tonight I want to fulfil that vow. I want to do so with honour, knowing my life is as much my enemy's as his is mine. I want to do so before witnesses, but without interference."

Now he did hesitate, but he did not change his arrogant stance, did not lower his eyes. "I have broken a Klingon vow of silence in saying what I have said," Worf stated, no trace of pretentiousness in his tone or his attitude. "The Klingon High Council, if ever approached on this matter, will disavow all I have said, just as they have disavowed my very existence. My actions, however, are not vengeful. I do what I must to make you, my comrades, and the Federation as a whole, aware of the danger this predatory alien represents. The only evidence I can offer, I offer now."

Worf fell silent. There were no more questions. He returned the Captain's stony expression with one of his own. He had stated his case. Now Picard faced a decision. The brief moments that passed before he spoke seemed to Worf to be an eternity.

"I reserve the right to halt this programme at any time," the Captain finally said.

Worf nodded. It was all he could ask. "I will leave to prepare for battle," he said in reply. "When I return I will run through the alien weaponry I will use. Then I will start the programme. The alien will already be present, in hiding." This said, Worf turned and left the holodeck.

When he returned moments later he was unrecognizable, menacingly so. The helmet mask he wore completely covered his head, giving no hint as to what lay beneath. It was a dark copper in colour, with thick and numerous tentacles hanging like hair from the sides and back of the headpiece. Black slits shielded his eyes. A concentrated wire-like netting covered his body, revealing his muscular Klingon stature. Armour plating, the same dirty copper colour as his helmet, covered his shoulders in tiers. Likewise his lower torso, forearms and shins were protected in the same thick armour. He carried a deadly looking spear, which he pounded into the earth as he came to a halt in the middle of the circle of transports.

"I now look like my enemy," he said, his voice somewhat muffled by the mask he wore. His hands reached for the sides of his head. A sigh of hydraulics sounded as he touched some unseen mechanism and removed the head piece.

"This mask," he said as he held it in his hand and stared at it with an open look of contempt, "contains a breathing apparatus and is phaser-proof. It houses infra-red and ultra-violet sensors, making it possible to track a prey simply by body heat. It also includes selective hearing channels, enabling the wearer to focus in, at great distances, on conversations, which are automatically recorded for instant playback. In addition, it provides instinctive targeting mechanisms."

He disposed of the helmet at his feet and his hand moved to his right shoulder. At the touch of another unseen device the tiers opened, and what was obviously a weapon sprang into being. "One such targeting mechanism controls this laser cannon," Worf stated objectively. "It fires, on thought command, intense bursts of proton energy with pinpoint accuracy."

The cannon slid back into oblivion and Worf raised his left arm. He made a fist and a razor-sharp and multi-edged knife appeared. "This retractable double-edged knife is really six knives in one," he said. "Each can be released separately, in tandem, or stay an extension of the arm. One thrust can surgically sever muscles, ligaments, cartilage..." He did not go on.

He made a fist again; the gauntlet retracted and Worf held out his right arm. "This," he said, as he fingered the apparatus strapped to his arm, "is the alien's camouflage controls." Four miniature screens appeared, red lights flashing. "It regulates the invisibility screen, and contains the controls for the self-destruct mode, which," he added ominously, "if left uninterrupted unleashes enough blast power to vaporize everything within 82 hectares." He touched the mechanism again and the copper-coloured shield slipped back into place.

His right hand slid down his right leg. Plunging it into a strap all but hidden in the armour, he withdrew it again, this time with a shiny apparatus covering his fingers. "This is a projectile net cowl," he said as he raised his hand to eye level. "By separating my fingers I can launch a multitude of lacerating wire traps, designed to pin a victim to any surface with high-speed self-driven bolts."

He immersed his hand again inside the hidden casing, replacing the weapon. His right hand then moved to another pouch fastened to his right upper thigh. "This is another weapon, one we Klingons call a smart weapon." He held a circular disc in his hand. It pulsated with power, a vibrant neon green colour. "It is shaped to fit the grasp perfectly," Worf pointed out, flexing his hand back and forth in illustration, "and responds to the will of its holder." Again he paused to let his words sink in. Then he flicked the weapon away. It screamed through the air, a glowing guillotine. Effortlessly slicing its way through four of the thick vines that crisscrossed the area, it suddenly reversed course to return harmlessly, in a tight arc, to his grasp. Worf replaced the weapon in its holding place and reached for the staff that stood ominously at his side.

"This is a telescopic spear," he said as he wrapped his hand around the weapon. "It is also a two-ended staff of death." His right hand joined his left. He twisted the spear at its mid-point and instantly, from both ends, appeared sharp and multi-pointed prongs. His eyes flicked from one point to the other. "These can be projected with horrifying impact velocities," he explained, "and be instantly replaced, up to ten times, or the staff can be used as a close combat weapon, whereby - " He twisted the spear in the opposite direction and the prongs withdrew to be replaced by multiple spearheads. Again he said no more. The weapon itself had spoken of its dangers.

He twisted the spear once more; it collapsed upon itself to become the telescopic spear again. Worf raised it to his eye and sighted down the length of the weapon at one of the massive trees. A strip of searing steel shot forward. Not only did the spear hit the target, it went through the giant trunk and beyond. The Klingon lowered the weapon, a satisfied expression on his face.

"These are the weapons my enemy employs," Worf said as he jabbed the spear back into the ground, picked up his helmet, and put it on again. "I advise you all to activate your transports immediately," he said, his voice once again muffled, "as I am about to start the programme."

"Lieutenant," Picard said suddenly. Worf looked at his Captain through the slits in the mask, seeing only his infra-red aura. "I cannot allow this programme to continue," the Captain stated, and Worf audibly snarled. "Remove the helmet, Worf," Picard commanded, and Worf resentfully did so.

"This alien you portray," the Captain said, seemingly ignoring the Klingon's threatening glare, "the weapons he uses, all speak of his predatory nature. I cannot allow you to fight such a being without the holodeck's life-safety feature instigated."

As he spoke, the Captain's transport floated to earth and its access port once more opened wide. Picard stepped out.

"I can sense your frustration at my order, Lieutenant," the Captain went on, "and I sympathise, but I cannot sanction the possible loss of your life. Given all you have shown us and told us, and with no disrespect intended, I foresee your possible defeat."

He paused in his speech as he made his way to Worf's side. "You are the first," he said, "and to date, the only Klingon to enter Starfleet Academy and graduate, with officer status, to serve aboard a starship. I will not jeopardise your life for the fulfilment of a vow in a holographic atmosphere. I am sorry, but that is my command decision."

There was no disguising the open aversion that washed Worf's features, and he made no attempt to do so. He had broken a Klingon vow of silence, had spoken of things he had no right to speak of, had stated his case in a way he'd hoped against hope would convince the Captain to permit the fulfilment of this challenge, had ...

"Captain, if I may?"

Worf turned to glare at Data as the transport the android occupied came to a rest and he stepped nimbly out. Simultaneously Worf noted all the transports were now floating gently to earth. The Captain had spoken. All were following his order. Worf bristled. His frustration clashed with his anger, his anger clashed with his pride, his pride held him silent and fuming.

"Yes, Data," Picard said, and Worf's eyes flashed back and forth between his two superiors.

Data did not meet the Klingon's angry glower and spoke directly to Picard. "I have accessed computer records while Worf was preparing for battle," the android said in his usual impassive manner, "and the results of my perusal are surprising."

Worf growled at the typical and infuriating roundabout way the android had of slowly getting to whatever point he meant to make. Data walked calmly to stand between the Klingon and the Captain before he continued.

"I have had to use the priority clearance granted me by Starfleet to gain access to the restricted files involved," Data went on not pausing for breath, "but I have succeeded in finding evidence that corroborates Worf's account of predatory aliens in the histories of Earth, Vulcan, Daled Four, Acamaria, Pentarus Five, Angosia..."

Picard held up his hand to halt the android's recital. "Those are all planets affiliated to the Federation," he said. "How is it the knowledge has not been made available to Starfleet?"

"Starfleet and the Federation are most definitely aware of the aliens' existence," Data replied, "but the knowledge is highly classified. Great deliberation and debate have taken place in the upper echelons of all the planets concerned, with Federation representatives on site, the general consensus being the inhabitants of each respective planet would be panic-stricken at the confirmation of the existence of such a predatory alien. Thus the secrecy. However, the USS Tribute is assigned the ongoing mission of investigating each reported incident in the hopes of finding some clue as to the location of the creatures' home planet.

Unfortunately, as Lieutenant Worf has stated, these aliens do not leave evidence behind."

Picard's blue-grey eyes turned to Worf. "Lieutenant," he said, "I am truly sorry to have to ruin your evening's entertainment. I know you would have fought bravely, and as fiercely as your opponent, but unless you agree to reinstate the life-safety feature, my order still stands."

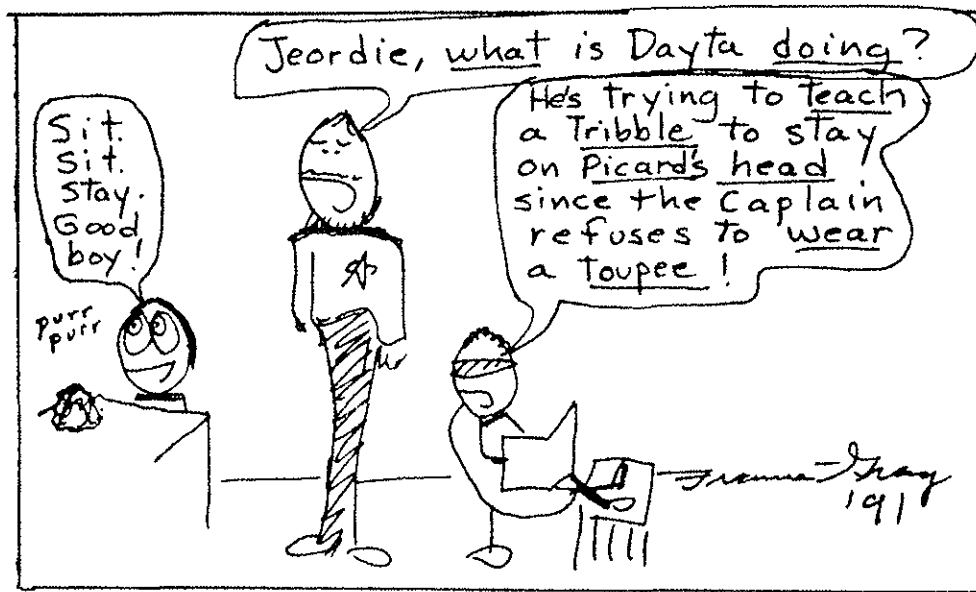
Worf shook his head, negatively.

"Very well," Picard stated, and then paused, as if re-considering a determination already made. Finally he spoke. "You have stated you have not made the pursuit of this Adversary With No Name your sole purpose in life, still your vow obviously weighs heavy on your soul. Therefore, I hereby officially state, that if it is your wish I will do all within my power to see you transferred aboard the USS Tribute, so you can at least attempt to fulfil your vow in a way sanctioned by the Federation, and by Starfleet."

Worf could not believe what he was hearing. Any of it! He had rightfully assumed these aliens had preyed on the inhabitants of other planets, but to have the assumption confirmed, to know the Federation and Starfleet were aware of the creatures' existence and had clandestinely assigned a Starship the sole mission of investigating the aliens, sent his blood soaring. To hear Picard say he would not only approve a transfer, but act on his behalf to see the transfer to fruition, made Worf's warrior spirit sing. He could be one of the Klingons who did faithfully stalk the Adversary With No Name!

"The decision is yours to make," Picard said, breaking into Worf's thoughts. The Klingon's burning eyes focused on the man. "I suggest you give the matter grave thought," the Captain advised, and then added, "and although I do not want to influence your decision in any way, Lieutenant, I must state that as your present commanding officer, I will see your departure as a great loss to the Enterprise."

Worf finally found his tongue, although, "I thank you, Captain," was all his now jubilant thoughts would allow him to say.



THE RIGHT BORN

by

Gaile Wood

"He is dead," the woman at the head of the bed said, and with the finality of the statement rose to her stately full height stretching long legs cramped from remaining still for so long.

She turned hawk-like features squarely on her companions. Her siblings. As the eldest child it fell to her to see their father's remains were treated with the respect due a great and powerful chieftain.

"Tunis." Her oldest brother bespoke her with deference, for by birth alone, she was the true leader.

"Unalt," she responded, and dipped her head. "What would you speak to me of, my brother?"

He inclined his head in acknowledgement of her graciousness, and said, "Now our father lies breathless, beloved sister, it behoves us to move quickly to ensure the succession - "

An impatient, unhappy sound interrupted Unalt in mid-flow, and he turned his fierce visage to the speaker. "Laril." He recognised the source of the noise. "You would speak?"

His younger sister returned the regard coolly. "I would, beloved brother." Laril spoke rapidly, as if afraid of the words which were to tumble from her lips. "Now our father is dead, we *must* ensure the Federation is here to supervise the succession, or our cousins, with the help of Lord Cartha - " she spat the name out angrily as if it sullied her tongue in the speaking - "our... uncle - " she paused, glancing meaningfully at her siblings, and 'saw' agreement in each beautiful dark face - "before they... he... " She was unable to finish and placed her face in both palms.

Silently, the two remaining brothers placed their arms about their distraught sister.

Gyrad raised his head, but not before he had covered his sister's distress with a fold of the robe he wore. The youngest brother - barely out of adolescence - Rilap, folded a corner of his robe also over Laril's corn-gold hair and held her closely.

Gyrad began to talk; he spoke for them all he felt. "The Federation *must* be here for the succession, beloved sister and brothers. Surely we risk our lives if we remain within?"

Unalt's rapier mouth grew harder, and he turned to Tunis. Thin nostrils flared, and he clasped his hands in the ritualistic nod of his people. "Brother, you speak the truth, as does Laril. Our lives are truly in peril should we remain here. The Federation has responded to our father's request, and is sending someone to bear witness." The light glinted from a high cheekbone, along the thin sensory pits which ran from nose to ear, illuminating his handsome features. He went on, "It will not be easy, my beloved. The Federation are unaware of the political tension and should they realise... " He trailed off, knowing he did not have to go into

detail concerning the U.F.P.'s policy of non-interference in any world's internal affairs.

Not even that an affiliated planet such as Lavith II could be thrown into civil unrest would move them from the starkness of the Prime Directive. Unless...

Unless the involvement was not of their own doing, but the result of machinations beyond their control. Such a plan was already beginning, and Unalt applauded his father's foresight and cunning.

Sleep easy, my father. Rest will not be denied you, he thought, and bent to kiss his sire's dead, but still warm, lips.

Captain's Log, Stardate 46624.2: The Enterprise is to be present at the inauguration of the new hereditary President of Lavith II - an interesting political situation whereby a family all contend for the honour through democratic election. This is normally limited to brothers and sisters, but sometimes extends to include other relatives, generally in the absence of siblings.

I have been requested by Starfleet to represent them officially, as a witness to the succession. The request was made by the late President, Pelatar, before his death...

Jean-Luc Picard paused thoughtfully before continuing with his log.

I am... concerned at the involvement of the Enterprise in a planetary affair, but my orders are quite specific: as a witness only!

I have one other reservation... The rapid demise of Pelatar is, I believe, highly suspect. As this is pure conjecture however, I will await the unfolding of events with interest.

"Captain." First Officer Riker's voice sounded loudly in the still of the ready room, and Picard waited for the Commander to continue. "We're within hailing distance of Lavith, and will be establishing standard orbit in fifteen minutes."

Picard glanced up from the small screen, and said, "Thank you, Number One." He ran his fingers over the controls and strode from the room onto the bridge.

He walked to the command chair, and sat in it, adjusting his uniform as he did. Crossing his legs, he observed the planet as they approached.

Lavith II. Home to a humanoid race of generous nature, of gentle temperament, gracile beauty; they were also blind, having evolved sonar and telepathy - honed to a fine edge - the two in conjunction making these people truly unusual. Lavith was also a world of soft breezes and gentle rain; one where war and civil unrest were unheard of, and had not reigned for over a millennium.

The Captain tilted his head, and narrowed his eyes. "Worf," he instructed, "open hailing frequencies to the palace officials, and the U.F.P. Embassy to inform them of our arrival."

Worf addressed the Captain as soon as he had established communications. "Sir, frequencies now open."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," responded Picard and rose out of the centre chair as he waited for a response.

The viewscreen flickered into an image of a tall humanoid female of quite striking features - dark-skinned, almost ebon, with the curious gold-peach fluff that caused the light to refract from her so effectively, and which deepened into true deeply gorgeous wheaten hair to fall behind her in long rippling waves. She flickered long exotic hands, and turned her blind face towards them in Lavithian greeting. She inclined her head gracefully, showing clearly the thin strips like silver scars, the receptors for her sonar.

"I am Tunis," she said simply. Distaste for the machinery in front of her flickered over her face; the Lavithian people disliked the use of instruments to speak - even *these*, brought about by the conjunction of the best minds of Lavith and Federation. Needs must though. Talking with non-telepaths was always a problem. She continued, the rich tones of a vibrant voice caressing the bridge and its Human Captain. "You must be the witness my father requested before his... his... death."

Odd, thought the Captain with interest. *An unusual welcome. Not the one I expected.* Aloud, careful to keep the musing from his tones, Picard agreed, "Yes, I am Captain Jean-Luc Picard, Tunis."

The sleekly gold head bowed again and she rose to her feet. "Captain," she began, "I would welcome you to our home in person, but it is imperative that I and my siblings do not delay in the accession." She leaned into the screen, intense with some alien emotion, then smiled close-lipped. "We must, Captain Picard, be about our business as soon as possible. Without delay. The elections *must* take place within the next ten-day."

"Madam, I will be at your disposal," he replied politely; she inclined her head regally, and the screen image bounced to be replaced by the view of Lavith. Picard turned to Troi, and looked a question at her. "Counselor...?" His tone invited further discourse.

Troi answered after a moment. "She's hiding something, Captain, but I'm not certain what. The Lavithians are a... highly telepathic race, with good shielding, and... I'm sure I caught a glimpse all's not as it should be..." she announced cautiously, hesitantly, as if careful consideration was required, after her initial words. "I can't be certain of anything yet, sir. I'll need to be in close vicinity to make a more accurate judgement."

"Hmm," Picard said thoughtfully. He was not happy about this situation; his intuition was giving him a bad time. "Anything else, Deanna?"

The Betazoid made a little move; a tiny lift of her shoulders indicated she felt her earlier statement was more than adequate for the time being.

"I see." Picard turned to the Klingon. "Worf, have the Embassy responded to our hail?"

"They are waiting to talk to us, sir," the security officer replied.

"Put them on," Picard directed.

Once more the planet was replaced by a face. This was of a grizzled individual with grey eyes, eyes which were cool and appraising. "Picard." The small mouth, hidden by a neat



beard and moustache, spoke his name with the same reflected coolness.

"Sir," responded the Captain in kind, and waited for the Human on the screen to speak again.

"Captain," the man started, "I would not have asked you here. It was only at the behest of the late Duf'vth Pelatar that you were called. I consider it to be an insult to myself, and my staff." The grey eyes regarded Picard with ice in their depths.

The Captain inclined his head fractionally towards the screen. "It is not a duty I find myself at ease with, Ambassador Garr."

Garr continued to watch Picard carefully for a moment. He seemed to come to a decision, and spoke again. "Have you arranged the details for the inauguration dinner, Captain?"

The question caught Picard on the hop. It was something he had not given much thought to, if he was honest, and had assumed, erroneously, that the dinner would be on Lavith.

The Ambassador, an astute reader of body language, recognised the Captain's dilemma, and came, reluctantly, to the rescue. "You were unaware of your responsibilities, Captain, to Tunis and her siblings?"

Picard managed to shake a reply out of his surprise. "It was something we had not received information about, sir."

Garr grunted. "That does not surprise me, Captain. The request for Starfleet's presence was... unexpected also." He stood and re-arranged his desk carefully before continuing, "There are some conventions you and your staff should be aware of." He directed his attention back to the bridge after he had satisfactorily completed tidying the table. "My aide will transmit the information to your communications station." The cold eyes stared out of the viewscreen at Picard, carefully calculating. "If you should need anything further..." He allowed the sentence to trail, and gave a thin smile; he flicked his regard to one side and again the screen showed Lavith II.

The silence on the bridge following the communique was startling. Riker's voice cut through the silence as efficiently as a laser.

"Not an auspicious start to the proceedings, sir," he remarked, and shared a quick look with his Captain.

"No," agreed Picard. He tugged his uniform into place, and tapped his communicator. "Guinan, I'd be grateful if you'd join me in my ready room."

"On my way, Captain," the woman responded, and yet more silence followed.

Picard rose, and addressed the First Officer. "The bridge is yours, Number One." He strode back to his ready room without a further glance at the bridge staff.

Guinan stepped through the doors into the room and cocked her head at Picard. He was seated behind his desk, and had a particularly sombre expression on his face. "You've got a

problem."

It was not a question, but a statement and she moved forward to the chair opposite him and sat in it. She gave a faint smile, then leaned forward resting her chin on her knuckles.

Picard sighed. "A banquet, Guinan. Do you think you could have everything prepared by tomorrow by 19:00 hours?" When she gave him a little nod, he relaxed visibly and leaned back in the chair, shifting slightly. "I'll leave it all in your capable hands, then."

Guinan did not move from her position; she studied the Captain's face carefully, her dark eyes taking note of the signs of strain on those familiar features. "Something," she said, "is bothering you."

Picard frowned, a set of creases appearing across his brow and etching lines from nose to mouth. "I don't know, Guinan." He shook his head. "Just call it a hunch... a gut feeling if you must. But I *know* there's more to this than meets the eye, and the Counselor would seem to concur with me." He stood, and walked round the desk to stand beside her and lean against its edge. He glanced down at his booted feet, and took a deep breath; he let it out sharply in a self-deprecatory manner before waving his hands dismissively. "I could be wrong. It could all be perfectly innocent."

"True," Guinan agreed slowly, and tipped her head at him in an interested manner. She relaxed her hands, and laid them flat on the table top. "But you don't think you're wrong about this, do you?"

Picard shook his head again, and rose to walk over to the fish to observe their endless motion in their tiny world. "No, I don't," he said quietly.

"Then," Guinan spoke softly, so softly Picard strained to hear her, "you must be prepared to follow your instinct, Captain. Has it ever failed you before?"

"No, Guinan, I don't believe it has." He managed a rueful smile over one shoulder.

"Then you've answered your own question, I think." She returned his smile, got up from the chair and headed for the doors. They slid open with a quiet shoosh; she turned before leaving. "I'll let you know as soon as the dinner is prepared."

"Thank you," responded Picard. They both knew he meant more than he was saying.

The Captain followed her out onto the bridge, and made his way up the ramp to the observation lounge. "A staff meeting," he said without preamble.

These words were greeted by his staff with a certain amount of expectation, and they all obediently trooped after their Captain into the room.

"Data," began the Captain, "what do we know about the Lavithians?" He reached the head of the table and sat in the chair, waiting for the Second Officer to reply.

Data's face became still as he checked his information. "The Lavithians have been members of the Federation for two point three decades. They have an intriguing, and unique - " he was starting to warm to his subject, and the eagerness to divulge the facts showed in his features - "political system of hereditary presidency - "

Picard held up his hand to halt the android in mid-flow. "Yes, Data, thank you. I was

already aware of this." He thinned his mouth. "What else do we know about these people?"

Data frowned. "There are gaps in the information I have, sir," he replied. "However, etiquette indicates we should, as the independent witness, host the banquet as Ambassador Garr has already stated. It is a custom predating the present form of democracy by some three hundred years."

"That's odd," the First Officer remarked. "Very peculiar indeed." He settled back in his chair and squinted at Picard with a calculating expression on his face. "Do I get the feeling, sir, that you're not certain why this particular custom has been reinstated?"

"Yes, Number One, you do," agreed the Captain; he tapped his fingers on the table surface for a second before addressing his Chief of Security. "Worf, what information did Ambassador Garr give us?"

The Klingon folded his arms across his chest. "Not very much, sir," he said regretfully. "The details mostly concerned specific food requirements, the numbers to be expected, by how much we will need to decrease the gravity, and so forth."

"No peculiarities?"

Worf thought, then shook his head. "Nothing that springs to mind, Captain."

Riker asked, "Are you looking for something in particular, Captain?"

Picard gave a slight grimace. "Not precisely, Will. Rather, I'm trying to find a clue as to what this is all about."

His staff regarded him with interest, and it was Troi who voiced their thoughts. "There's a possibility this is a ruse for some kind of cover-up," she hazarded. "That might explain the feeling I had from Tunis... and the... *ambiguity* from Ambassador Garr...?" She came to a halt, and caught the Captain's eyes. There was approval in them.

Picard gave a nod of agreement. "You're quite sure you could sense nothing more - " He hesitated as he searched for a word - "more... substantial?"

"No, Captain," she said apologetically.

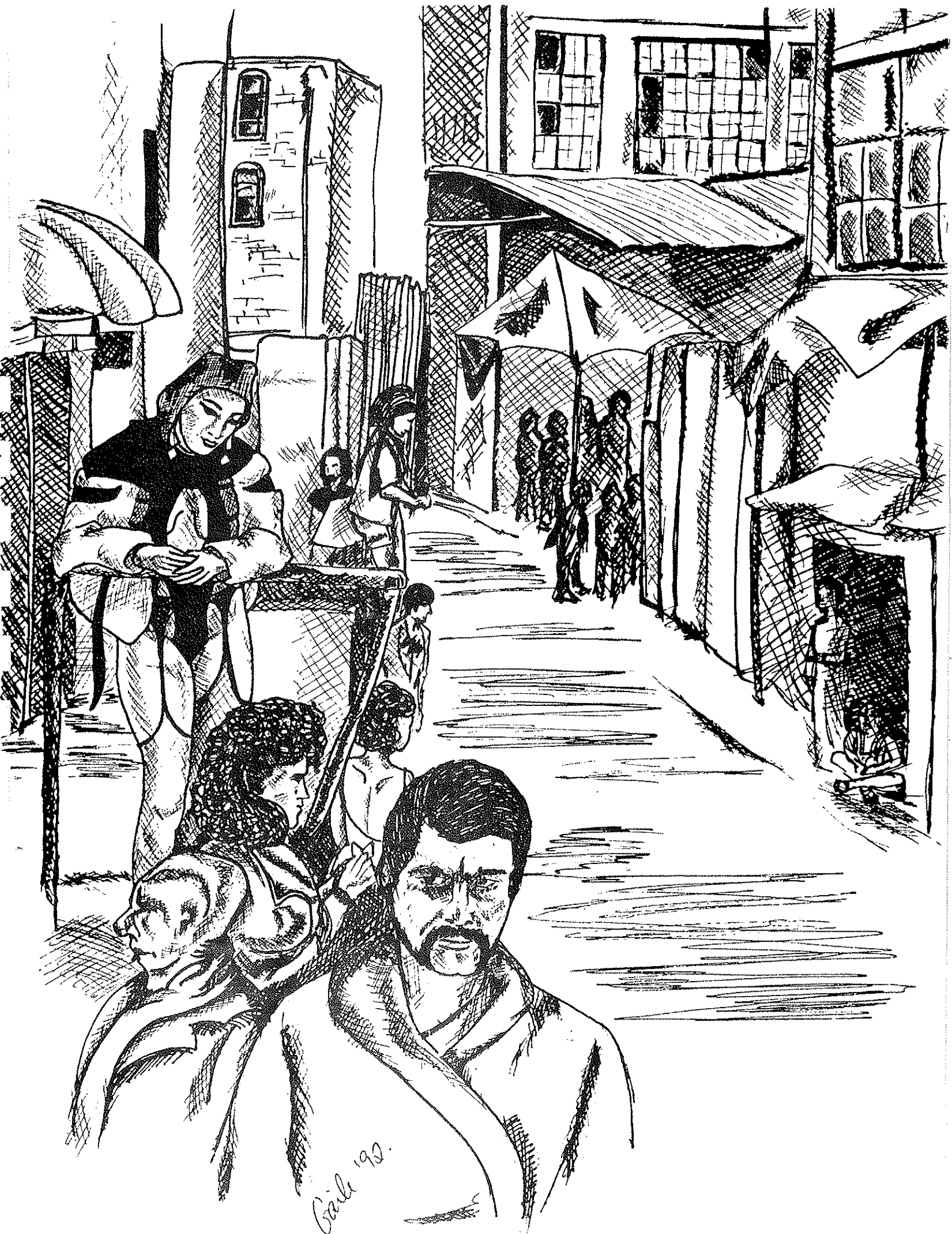
Data piped up, "It is your conjecture, Captain, that Pelatar knew he was going to die?"

"Astute as always, Commander," responded Picard, and gave a grave glance to his staff. "The fact we are to be hosts for this inauguration dinner seems to confirm my suspicions." He dropped his chin to his chest in thought for a moment before addressing Riker. "Worf and I will transport to the Embassy to speak with Garr. I want to ascertain how much he knows of the political atmosphere, and whether he has noticed anything... odd."

Riker looked mutinous, but backed down at the clear gaze he received from Picard. "I'd prefer to do this myself, sir," he insisted.

"Yes, Number One, I dare say you would. However, this is where I take the helm." He turned his attention to the android officer. "Data, I want you to collect and go through all information pertaining to this custom and the circumstances likely for its application."

"Yes, sir," Data responded, and rose from his chair to go about his business.



As the doors closed behind him, Picard turned to the Counselor. "Deanna, I'll need you. Your input will prove invaluable." Finally, he addressed Riker. "Will, the Enterprise is yours. Mr. Worf, with me." And he left the room with Troi and the Klingon close on his heels.

Riker stared at the doors as they shut on his Captain, then headed purposefully for the bridge.

A tall figure stamped through the gently falling rain, pulling at the dark mantle to keep the water out of his face. He made his way unerringly towards the steps of the house in front of him, not pausing except once to toe a child's pet out of his way. The small reptilian creature uttered a single screech of annoyance and fled, tail dragging behind it, up the nearest and darkest alleyway. It whistled disgustedly as he went past, rattling its scales threateningly, and poured poison out with its feeble telepathic powers. The figure gave it no further heed, but sent an automatic command for the beast to stop its whining.

Lord Cartha strode past his guards and across the polished and warm wooden floor of his palatial residence. The Lavithian paused momentarily before a small shrine, bowing to it; he placed thin fingers in a hollow and withdrew them almost immediately bringing them to his nostrils. He drew a breath through his lungs, allowing excitement to race through him. Such a challenge did not often come in any man's lifetime. He gave a wry chuckle. Indeed... not for *many* lifetimes. The brief respite from his machinations afforded him some small pleasure, and he set off again in the direction of the clandestine meeting he was to head.

The Lavithian's long even stride brought him eventually to a pair of doors which he opened, swinging them shut behind him as he went into the room beyond.

Blind faces turned to greet their father, and there were faint murmurs of obeisance. Cartha's mouth tilted in a smile, and he hummed slightly as he identified each of his offspring by their own familiar body shape and scent, the tell-tale 'feel' of each mind as it opened to him, allowing him to 'fit' into the collective identity of family.

"Lord," murmured the eldest of his children. The young male who had spoken topped his father by some centimetres.

"Iladyth." Cartha acknowledged his son, turned his attention on the remaining children. "Have the rituals been completed?"

"Yes, Lord," they chorused.

Cartha felt pride in his family course through him. "Excellent."

He threw back the hood of the cloak he wore, scattering the drops of water from the fine dark material. Some fell to spatter and bedew the floor, sparkling like so many netted stars in the glimmer of sunlight, and there, in the stillness of the room, tiny motes of dust hung, flurrying in the stream of brightness. He undid the clasp, discarding the cape on the seat of a large carved chair.

Cartha moved deeper into the room, sensing for the alien he knew should be here. A Human. One of Garr's staff, bought for so little. The Lavithian shook his head. These creatures were so strong, quite dangerous until you had one of them caught by the *Lol' Irthit*. Human minds were weak, open to suggestion, and vulnerable to the technique Cartha's ancestors had found so useful in hunting larger, more ferocious predators than themselves. It

had been almost too easy to bend this one to their will.

"So, Riefenstahl, have you been able to arrange for Laril's demise aboard the Federation Starship?"

The object of his attention shifted slightly, and withdrew deeper into shadows.

"You do not answer," Cartha's voice was soft, but all the more dangerous for that.

Riefenstahl adjusted the well-made tunic he was wearing, and nodded. A powerful man, with a thatch of dark-blond hair which tumbled in disarray to broad shoulders.

"The arrangements are made, sire," he said in a low rumble.

"Who will assist you?" Cartha snapped his fingers at the man imperiously.

"Dickinson."

"We can trust him?" The blond head bowed slightly in response, and Cartha blew out a breath as he regarded the Human shrewdly. "Here!" he ordered, and the man obeyed.

The Lavithian scanned the Human briefly, then touched the nerve centres in his brain which were receptive to pleasure, and triggered a release of endorphins. Riefenstahl stiffened, gasped slightly, his eyes widening with shock at his body's remembered, violent reaction to the stimulus.

Cartha and his children joined and applied themselves to the ritual with assiduity. Together, it was easy to bond this creature to their whim, and they left the man rigid, his brain filled with no thought except to serve them the best he was able. They filled him with the plan, showed him its intricate details, pummelling the thoughts into shape so that no-one would be able to tell if the thoughts were Riefenstahl's or foreign. The Human would know he belonged body and soul to Cartha, owed allegiance to none but they, and it would be only under intense scrutiny from a Master that they could be discovered.

The Lord was well pleased with his children, with his vassal, and... with himself. He allowed self-satisfaction to begin to warm him, and he smiled, the glint of pointed teeth showing briefly from under his lips. Everything was going to plan. The death of Pelatar, the destruction of the sibling link with the demise of Laril - already in its final stages with the premature death of their sire. Cartha sighed before he made his way to his favourite chair. It was good to be alive.

Picard and his companions materialised in a large garden and as soon as they had solidified, Garr stepped forward to greet them. He proffered an infinitesimal bow to the Captain, and merely acknowledged Worf and Troi with a curt nod.

"Captain." Garr held out an arm and gestured towards the building ahead of them. He fell into step beside Picard; they set off up the pathway.

The Captain took the time to take in his surroundings. The lighter gravity made him feel as if he was flying up the path, and he enjoyed the sensation as well as the vista set out before them.

The Embassy was built in a circle of the red-brown brick the Lavithians favoured. It was a modern building, but not unattractive, and had vines creeping up the surface of the walls in a confused mass of leaves. The plants were studded with the small bright stars of their flowers, tiny white gems amid emerald-green fading to lemon. The whole effect was colourful, and with the tall Lavithian servants in their formal dress, intensely regal.

Troi, behind Picard, could not help but appreciate the garden with its beautifully kept borders and neatly swept gravel. Each and everything in the garden looked as if it had grown there because it wanted to, not because someone had placed it there. That, she understood, was the hallmark of a gardener who was a true artist, and no mere artisan. That this had all been accomplished without sight... It was a garden where she would be happy to while away many an hour.

Worf noticed her approval, and gave a mental sigh. He attracted her attention as she was beginning to lag behind the Ambassador and the Captain, and waited for her to catch up.

"Counselor," he rumbled in an undertone, "please stay in step with us. It is my job to ensure both your and the Captain's safety. I would not like something to happen to you." Seeing agreement in her face, he went on, "Have you noticed the appearance of the servants?"

Furtively, Troi scanned the tall aliens, but could see nothing untoward. She hesitantly felt for their emotions, and found their minds were well-shielded; she could barely sense any residual leakage. Each was tightly controlled. She raised a brow, and gave Worf a questioning look.

"I know what I feel, Worf," she said. "What do you see?"

The Security Chief scowled, then said, "Weapons." He glanced at the woman beside him, and registered the unquiet sitting on her face. "For a world with a record of peace such as Lavith, Counselor, I think this highly suspect."

"I'm with you," Troi agreed, quietly fervent. "We'd better let the Captain know."

"Agreed." Worf continued in a low voice, "However, I do not believe now is an opportune moment. As soon as we are unlikely to be disturbed, I will contact Commander Riker, and inform the Captain." Worf clenched the muscles in his jaw before continuing. "I am... uneasy, Counselor."

"So'm I," she muttered, and gave the Klingon a radiant smile for the benefit of the Lavithian they passed.

The tall male spared them a small part of his attention, but directed the intensity of the regard on the Ambassador and his companion. Both Picard and Garr seemed oblivious of the interest they were receiving, and passed by them as if they were invisible.

The men melted into the brickwork like the excellent retainers they were; Worf took note of this, calculating their possible movements as they entered the Embassy. He could not help feeling uncomfortable, and he could see the Betazoid was having the same trouble. He checked his phaser surreptitiously.

Troi sent her empathic skills further into the place; she could feel each Lavithian as if they were a blank spot, as if they did not exist, so carefully were they controlling themselves. She touched Worf briefly on the arm; she had felt something before it was savagely suppressed.

"Worf... " she began, but once she had his regard could not finish the sentence. She shook her head, and the Security Chief ground his teeth with impatience.

He took a good look at the interior of the Embassy while fighting his irritation, and scanned the balconies which were piled on top of one another like the layers of a wedding cake.

Along each were ranged the household - all Lavithian - and Worf moistened his mouth with the tip of his tongue. None too soon, for him at least, they moved out of the central area of the building into a corridor, then entered a room which was purely functional.

There was a central desk, some easy chairs, and a number of cabinets. The ubiquitous computer console was set on the desk surface, and sitting at ease in a chair to one side of the table, her long limbs arranged elegantly, was Tunis. She raised her head as they approached, taking her hands out of the book she had on her lap.

The woman rose to her feet; came towards them. She was impressive. Nearly two metres tall, slim as a wand, she gave them her people's welcome - an outspread hand.

"Captain," she said; she smiled gravely at them and Garr. "It is a great pleasure to meet you." Inclining her head to Garr, she extended a slender hand to Picard.

The Captain clasped the hand and bowed slightly over it. "Madam." He released her.

"And these are...?"

Picard turned to introduce Troi and Worf, who both took the slender hand briefly. They stepped back once the introductions were completed.

Garr swept past Tunis and Picard to take the seat behind the desk, and propping his elbows on the table-top, gazed shrewdly at them all. "Captain, Tunis will be coming herself to the dinner you are arranging on the Enterprise, as you know. However, her siblings will accompany her also, which is slightly unusual."

"Indeed," agreed the Captain; he waited for Garr to continue.

The Ambassador's features schooled themselves into impassiveness, allowing nothing past the diplomatic mask. "There will be a party of fifty persons to accommodate, and - "

Picard cut in impatiently. He had waited quite long enough, and even now, this man was prevaricating. He wanted to find out what the hell was going on. "Ambassador," he said firmly, in accents that brooked no argument, "I would be inordinately grateful if you'd tell us why there is all - "

Tunis interrupted Picard - *Too close*, she thought, panicking slightly. *He's too near the truth...* - with a quiet clearing of her throat. "Captain." She drew up beside him, put her palms upwards in front of his face. "Please, I beg you, indulge me. I realise you are uneasy with our customs, but this is a necessary thing - I swear we will not trouble you or your ship longer than we need to."

Picard pursed his lips slightly, still unconvinced - though she sounded sincere enough. He gave a sigh - he really could not find any reason at the moment to deny Tunis' request. Reluctantly, he gave her a nod of agreement. "Very well. But... Madam, Ambassador, I need to speak to the Enterprise - " he held up a hand as Garr opened his mouth to protest - "privately."

Something passed over Tunis' face and Garr's features became even blanker than before. The Ambassador obviously noticed what was in her features because he backed down noticeably. "As you wish, Picard," he said, and withdrew with the Lavithian to an annex off the main room.

Picard waited until they were out of earshot before turning to his staff. "Worf?" he asked carefully.

The Klingon regarded the occupants of the annex before he spoke, and then he hesitantly offered his opinion. "I believe the Lavithian servants are carrying weapons, Captain. However - " he looked almost apologetic - "until I have the opportunity to bodysearch one of them, that may be idle guesswork. Also, I think your... hunch of something being hidden, something to do with internal politics, is correct."

"Politics, hmmm?" mused Picard. He folded his arms, narrowing his eyes as he thought. "Yes, that would seem to fit." He raised a brow at Troi in question.

The Betazoid's pretty mouth drew into a hard line. "I have to agree with Worf, sir. The Lavithians are generally people who broadcast their emotions in communication, and they are not doing that. In itself, I would have to report that as a highly unusual circumstance."

"Politics, though?" Picard was puzzled. All the facts did seem to fit a coup of some kind - but on a world noted for the stability of its political system? Frankly, he really was quite confused.

He tapped his insignia. "Picard to Data. Commander, have you managed to find the circumstances which would involve an independent witness being present at an inauguration on neutral territory?"

The android did not respond immediately, and Picard waited patiently. Finally, Data replied. "Captain, I have been unable to trace a single instance of the initiation of the ceremony Y'Reth within recent history. Certainly, it has not been called for as long as Lavith has been a member of the Federation, nor was it a prerequisite of Pelatar's own succession some thirty point five four years ago."

"I see..." said Picard. He sighed - the pieces to this particular puzzle did not seem to be fitting together any more easily. All this line of research appeared to be doing was to raise yet more questions. He addressed his Second Officer. "Continue with this line of inquiry, Commander, you may yet find a common denominator."

"Very good, sir," replied Data, and the communication ceased.

Picard sucked in a breath, and chewed his mouth for a second. "Ambassador Garr, Dut'vth," he said calmly. "I would be delighted to have you aboard the Enterprise for dinner tomorrow evening at 19:00 hours."

Tunis and Garr travelled back from the annex as they heard the Captain give the invitation. Both bowed politely in response.

The alien woman touched her fingertips to Picard's face briefly in an expression of thanks, and swung on her heel, sweeping past with graceful, light steps. Garr watched her exit, then eyed the Captain.

"You are not required here, Picard," he said, and on these words dismissed them as if

they had never been there by removing himself from their presence.

Worf growled as he watched the man go. "I do not care for Garr, Captain."

Picard gave a faint snort of agreement. "Sometimes, Mr. Worf, we are unable to choose our bedfellows. Expediency often makes fools of us all." He gave Troi and the Klingon a grim smile. "We'll have to see what tomorrow holds for us, won't we?"

Tapping his communicator, the Captain said clearly, "Three to beam up, Mr. O'Brien."

Garr followed Tunis at a slight distance, deep in thought. He was extremely perturbed by what seemed to be happening around him. He knew his attitude to Picard had been more than a little... forced... Perhaps he was getting too old for this job. *God knows, I've been doing it since Pelatar took the reins!*

The Ambassador turned into the garden and strolled alongside Tunis; she bent to sniff and examine the perfume and shape of a flower. He watched her, knowing she could sense his concern, his worry, and his indignation. He thought it was well-hidden, but could never be totally certain how much, or how *deeply*, a Lavithian would probe to find the truth. Of course, the death of Pelatar would decrease their abilities somewhat, but... It was always wise to hide the most perturbing of emotions.

He made a conscious decision to speak. "Madam, why was the Federation brought into what is a purely internal affair?"

The tall woman straightened and turned her spectacular head to face him. "I do not understand your question, Ambassador."

"Hah!" Garr scoffed, then shook his head and folded his arms. "Tunis, I've known you and your siblings all your lives; your mother was my friend, and Pelatar was a - " a faint smile played round the Human's mouth in remembrance of the wily alien chieftain - "a... worthy opponent. There is nothing you cannot tell me. I am a friend - "

"You are also a servant of the Federation, Ambassador," Tunis reminded him sharply. "This is not something I can seek counsel about."

"Why?" Garr pushed; nearly thirty years had still *not* been enough to totally prepare him... This was proving to be a tense situation, one he was not able to get to grips with. He was very worried by the withdrawal into such a tight family knot by Pelatar's children. True, they were the Right Born, and it was as much custom that led them into seclusion as grief and the need to mourn... but to call the Y'Reth and ask for outside witnesses...?

"My sire's death was no accident."

"I know," Garr agreed. He was insistent then. "You do *not* need another witness; I would be honoured to take the task - "

"No!"

The Ambassador raised his brows at the familiar tones - she was her father's daughter, and no mistake - lapsing into silence. A questioning silence.

"Do not press me," she snapped, "for I cannot give an explanation now."

"Cannot, or will not?" asked Garr.

"Either. The choice is yours."

Presented with the devil or the deep blue sea, Garr shrugged slightly, and turned away from her. Her lovely voice reached him as he started back up the path.

"Ambassador... "

Garr paused, swinging back to face her, and tilted his head curiously on one side. He sketched a bow. "Madam?"

Tunis' lips vibrated slightly, and the Human felt the touch of her sonar as she orientated on him. She seemed to be considering a reply of some kind to the unvoiced questions hanging between them.

"Nothing, Ambassador." She flipped her long hand at him, indicating he leave her presence.

Garr bowed again, and left her.

As soon as Picard walked onto the Holodeck he experienced the gravity shift which was present at the entrance - it caused him to stumble momentarily. Inside, Guinan had done them proud, and he knew he had been more than right to assign this duty to her. Guinan instinctively *knew* what was right in these circumstances.

The whole place was a treat for the eyes. Where she had obtained the necessary information regarding the Y'Reth he could not guess - certainly not in such fine detail. The lady, herself, was adding the finishing touches by arranging a huge banner of some exotic, sweetly perfumed herbs and flowers around the perimeter of the room.

With her usual uncanny instinct for knowing when someone was in a room with something on their mind, Guinan said, her voice slightly muffled, "What do you think, Captain?"

Picard rotated slowly to take in the entire effect, and nodded silently before saying a word. "Quite beautiful, Guinan."

She got down from the chair she had been standing on, dusted off her hands carefully, and tipped her head on one side to gaze at him interestedly. "Okay, what gives?"

Picard shrugged.

Guinan squinted at him knowingly, sauntering over to stand by him. "Nothing to say, Captain? Or do you find it impossible to articulate your worries?" The comely dark face with its fine eyes waited with humour in their depths - there always was, unless the problems really were insurmountable.

"The same, huh?" She cocked her head again.

"The same," agreed Picard; he found a seat and plonked himself in it. He glanced up at her. "Tell me, Guinan, what are your instincts on this - " he waved his hand around the Holodeck - "and what it means? Do you have *any* idea at all what in God's name I'm getting involved in, and why Garr is such a... " He shook his head in frustration, searching for the right phrase. He had it. "Stuffed shirt."

"Well," Guinan started; she gave a chuckle, "I could be wrong, but I think he's wary of you because - "

Picard cut in in disbelief. "Good grief, Guinan! The man surely doesn't think I'm after his job, does he?"

It was Guinan's turn to shrug. "Could be. Could be you might need him as an ally, Captain. I'd try cultivating him, if I were you."

The Captain gave an incredulous snort mixed with irritation. "Hardly my choice, Guinan, to be here."

"True," she agreed. "But you could do worse than simply being a little more giving yourself."

Picard eyed the woman, and opened his mouth to speak, but she broke in before he could get anything out. "I really need to get this finished, Captain, so you can perform your required duty correctly in every way." She smiled to take the sting from her words. "If you don't mind, of course."

Summarily dismissed, Picard headed out of the Holodeck back to his quarters, her words echoing in his brain.

The eldest brother, Unalt, took in the surroundings of the ship the five of them found themselves on with fascinated interest, and some delight.

On his face, the traces of new-found love could be seen beginning to etch its transparent, longing way. He took intense breaths, his mouth aquiver, directed at the equipment in the transporter room before they were led away. He was equally intense in the following tour Picard took them on round the Enterprise.

Unalt finally addressed the Chief Engineer - on first sensing La Forge he had been startled by the strange technology fixed to his face, but managed to control his impulse of horror and switch it to other areas. "Commander, you have been able to designate certain areas of this ship for our comfort simply by routing a sub-command through your main computer?"

La Forge turned his VISORed face in the tall alien's direction before replying to the question. "Essentially that's right, sir. Obviously we've had to retain normal gravity in some areas for the comfort of the rest of the crew, and to ensure the correct functioning of certain key equipment. But, you and - " he gave a slight bow to the others in the Captain's party - "your siblings are unlikely to go into those."

Laril floated up to the Engineer, and with the open curiosity of her people, reached out sensitive fingers to La Forge's face. Her touch whispered over his skin before being stopped by Tunis.

The older alien woman seized her sister's wrist and jolted her back into step with Gyrad, who took charge. "Please, Commander, take no offence. My sister - " Tunis's whole body spoke of her discomfiture and embarrassment - "has not learned to control her inquisitiveness yet." Tunis received, for her trouble, a dark glare, which she sensed. It distressed her; all could see it.

The Engineer licked his lips; he had seen only too clearly the reaction - even though well-hidden - from Unalt and the rest of the Lavithians. He had been glad they were not included in the rest of the tour. "None taken," he said, a polite enough lie.

"You must think us strange, Commander," she hurried on in the manner of someone who wants to cover a solecism, "but we are... curious about the thing on your face." She tried to express her discomfort. "The sense you possess is such an enigma... but to... cover the organs with an ugly machine..."

Geordi and the rest of his colleagues listened as affably as they could, but without any real interest in hearing the excuse - if that was what it was. *He* had never had it easy amongst his 'normal' friends, so why should he accept the patronisation of an alien species merely because protocol demanded it? He felt disappointed somehow, though. In the Lavithians he had hoped to find kindred spirits.

"Oh?" responded Picard for the Chief Engineer. The word held a hint of ice, and Tunis, as well as the senior officers, recognized that going on could estrange them further.

Tunis could not heed this... would *have* to make them understand their feelings if they were to rely on this Human Captain and his strange crew. "You do not understand, Captain Picard," she insisted, earnest, desperate to communicate with this cold man who was freezing the air to absolute zero. "My people do not have the sense you call sight - " She was intense with effort, pleading with open palms - "To find one like us amongst you is to find we have common ground."

Picard and the rest of his officers began to relax as she tortuously tried to complete their liberation from the faux pas.

Troi tilted her head; she wanted to hear what Tunis had to say, and this was the first time she had truly felt Lavithian emotions almost unfettered. Reaching out a hand the Counselor touched the other woman lightly, realising this was permitted almost instinctively. "We hear you, Madam."

Tunis gave the small woman a bewitching smile, and sighed apologetically to La Forge. "You must have thought us so gauche, Commander. We meant no... " She halted in her speech, and placed herself in front of Geordi, putting her own fingers on his temples. Her lips vibrated faintly in some silent litany, and the darkly beautiful face softened from the hard expression she customarily wore.

Tunis reached inside her robe to take something small, but jewel-bright, to hand it to the engineer. "Please, Geordi La Forge, forgive us. We did not understand that you are honoured amongst your own people. We wish you to hold this in readiness..."

The Chief Engineer received the slender stem of the Lavithian Thought Flower, put the pansy-faced blossom to his nose and inhaled a deep, delicious fragrance reminiscent of sun-warm apricots. Geordi offered hesitantly, "I... thank you."

Tunis turned her attention to the Betazoid. "We meant no harm, you must know,

Counselor Troi."

Troi responded by allowing the brief stroke of Tunis's mind against her own. "I know," she reassured her.

Tunis again bowed to La Forge gracefully, all flowing lines, and golden hair. "Forgive us." The Engineer allowed her to place his hand on her face. He smiled, and Tunis released him, relaxing visibly.

Picard lowered his brows. "Then, Madam, you must accept *our* apologies also."

"Thank you," Tunis said simply.

Picard continued the rest of the tour with hardly any more interruption; his guests were politely interested in everything he showed them, stopping to quiz him or one of the officers about this point or that. He had been pleasantly surprised to find the Lavithians had done their homework in reams.

Arriving at the Holodeck, the Captain and his party found the remainder of the Lavithian delegation there, as was Ambassador Garr. There was also an individual to whom Worf had taken an instant dislike - one who purported to be a relative of Dut'vth Tunis, one who kept his predator's features turned on her, hyena-like. This tall, grizzled male was one Lord Cartha, and, in the Security Chief's opinion, bore keeping an eye on.

The tall Klingon made his way over to the First Officer's side, and pointed out Cartha. "Commander," he rumbled, "*that* one is dangerous."

Riker quirked a brow at him. "Speculation, Worf?"

Worf folded his arms across his chest before making a reply; he did not really have anything to go on, just gut feeling - like his Captain - and appeared vaguely embarrassed at not having hard fact. "Counselor Troi admits to feeling uneasy about Cartha, sir. She - " he scowled and pressed his mouth into a thin line - "is not able to sense him, just as the others on Lavith."

Riker gestured to Deanna, who slowly came over to them, making social chit-chat as she did. "What's this about Cartha?"

She shook her head. "Will, I'll tell you what I told the Captain. I know there's something going on, but I don't know what... yet. Cartha... is bad news."

"Hmm!" grunted the First Officer, and pursed his mouth as he regarded the older Lavithian. "Is he related to Tunis and her siblings?"

"Yes," said Troi. "He's a relative on the distaff side." She gave Riker a wry look; her mouth twisting slightly. "At least, so I gather. But familial relationships are so *difficult* to establish in Lavithian genealogy, I could be wrong."

"He's sure," Worf stated, uninvited, but utterly certain. He directed his dark stare at Riker and the Counselor. "*That* is all I need to know."

Riker considered the problem before them briefly. "I think, Worf, we need to know how Tunis and her siblings feel about this Cartha." His blue gaze travelled the length of the tall alien male, and noted what the Klingon had spotted on Lavith's surface. "If you'll get on with

that, Worf. Discreetly, I think."

Worf acknowledged the suggestion curtly. "Commander." Then went about the work with alacrity.

Riker moved smoothly, oil on water, to the Captain's side. "A word with you, please, sir." He spoke quietly, a smile touching the corners of his mouth.

Picard apologised to the man he had been conversing with, caught Riker's elbow and steered him a little way from the main party. "Be brief, Commander."

The First Officer features grew grave. "There's a problem."

The Captain eyed his second in command. "Oh?"

"Nothing serious yet, sir. It's this damn - " Riker waved his hands about indicating the Holodeck - "business. Worf and Deanna both feel one of our - for want of a better word - guests is trouble with a capital 'T'."

Picard made a careful adjustment of his uniform, flicked imaginary fluff from the sleeve. "Cartha," he stated coolly.

"Yes, sir," agreed Riker, surprised as always by the Captain and his sharp intellect.

"And the siblings, Tunis' involvement in this...?"

"Worf's being discreet," Riker murmured in reply, some humour in his voice.

"It may interest you, Number One, that Data has been able to trace the last incidence which necessitated the Y'Reth ceremony." Picard watched the Lavithians as they crowded the Holodeck, their voices molten-honey mellow, mingling with his crew and the Embassy staff.

The Commander stared at his Captain, then made an effort to relax. "Sir?" The tones of the question held acres of curiosity.

"Yes, Will. Data has been highly efficient, as always." Picard huffed a breath. "Cartha is an uncle with a number of hopeful offspring - very hopeful... "

"Read ambitious?" Riker put in, and received a slight inclination from the Captain. "Are we talking internal politics, sir? The variety where it's best to be seen and not heard?"

Picard continued to regard the Lavithian contingent, simply giving Riker a curt nod as a reply. After a pause he added in an undertone, "The ritual usually indicates there was an assassination..." His voice faded and he exchanged a meaningful glance with the Commander. "A *successful* assassination which involves family."

Riker gave a silent whistle. "Seems you were right, sir... but... The trouble is they're here and we can't easily get rid of them. Not the best diplomacy to tell... er... guests they're not welcome, and would they mind vacating the ship..." There really was no need to go on, the ramifications were clear enough.

"Quite," said Picard, eyes cold. He noticed the movement of his Chief of Security towards them. The bearing of the man made him look more carefully; Worf was troubled, and if *he* was, then it behoved the Captain to feel the same way.

The Klingon was quite brusque, and brushed past the clusters of people, almost flying in the lighter gravity, to reach his commanding officers.

Upon obtaining his goal, Worf rumbled out what was bothering him. "Captain, Tunis' sister, Laril, is missing, and has not been seen for the last hour."

As if these words were a trigger, Tunis, her brother Unalt and Ambassador Garr closed in on the Captain, as did Cartha. They suddenly surrounded the smaller Human, causing him to take an involuntary step backward.

The alien male spoke first; his words were spat out in haste as he pushed aside Tunis to get even closer to Picard. "You will hear my claim, Captain, and witness that, I, Cartha, Lord of Hullias, claim the Presidency of Lavith for my bloodline. Tunis' rule will be handicapped by the death of Laril, and she must renounce her right, and place it in my hands..."

Tunis and Unalt both snarled at their uncle, and the woman gyrated to face Picard. "He is a TRAITOR!" she hissed, and spat at Cartha, hate boiling on her golden face. "Captain Picard, he is not to be trusted. He is a liar, a piece of excrement!" Tunis leaned over him, distraught, but firm in her resolve. "Captain Picard, my siblings - " she raised her voice to its highest pitch, and everyone in the room turned to listen, propelled, unable not to - "and I claim asylum from Lord Cartha. My friend Garr and you I claim as witness that he did murder my sire, Pelatar, to force the succession rites before their rightful time. That he seeks to claim the Presidency for his own bloodline..." She turned her blind face towards Cartha, and scoffed at him openly, allowed her sonar to sweep through him.

Tunis returned her attention to the Captain then, regret vying for position on her features. *Forgive this one, Jean-Luc Picard, for what you did not wish upon yourself.* But she could sense no forgiveness in the man. His anger battered at her, but she found it was not just directed at her. Garr and himself were included in the scathing self-rebuke. From the brief touch of her mind in his, Tunis learned a lot about this Human and his exacting standards.

Riker traded a glance with Worf, and repeated, "Murder?" Pausing to catch up, he continued, "You know Laril is missing, Madam, don't you?" He talked as loud as he could over the sound of hell breaking loose - attempted to direct some sanity into the disorder, and Worf waded off to try and find the instigator.

Unalt rotated to face the First Officer. "Beloved sister...? That *cannot* be. We have held her thought in our minds, and she is in no danger - " Abruptly, he broke off, standing stock-still, listening, then he cried out at the same time as his siblings. "Beloved...!"

They reeled together and huddled in a group, grief overtaking them. Cartha stood rock-steady, utterly certain Laril was no longer a problem.

Riker grasped the eldest brother gently, cautious of his strength. "Unalt, is she alive, and if she is, can you sense where?"

"She... lives," Unalt gasped, pushing at the Commander's hands with his own. Riker tightened his grip, and Unalt sagged against him. "The pain, the cruel embrace - "

"Where, Unalt?!" Riker barked, and a picture flashed into his mind. "Worf!" The Commander saw the Klingon turn his head. "Engineering!"

Laril, along with all her siblings, had been fascinated by the immensity and complexity of the Starship. Her mind had reeled against Gyrad's with exclamations of the strangeness of it all, and she had drawn the folds of her ceremonial robe discreetly over her mouth to hide her astonishment. Protocol did demand that!

She had been further amazed by the Holodeck - Lavith truly had nothing to rival this! She wandered away from the main group, intent on research of a personal nature. She wanted to taste some of these exotic delicacies her strong sense of smell told her were waiting on a table. As always, she could feel the delicate presence of her siblings in the background of her mind.

At the table, she allowed the folds of brilliant purple to fall from her face and directed her attention to the burgeoning foodstuffs arranged so temptingly. Long, slender fingers found a pear and Laril raised it to her nose, relishing the scent of it. She took a bite, a cautious taste, and caught at the juice of the ripe fruit as it spilled into her mouth. Delicious! She devoured it eagerly, and found more. Terran foods were so *wonderful*!

"Dut'orth Laril?"

Startled from her experimentation, Laril came to attention at the sound of both her name and her title. She faced the source of the voice, sonar identifying the individual as a member of Ambassador Garr's staff.

"Riefenstahl?" she asked, curiosity getting the upperhand.

The man bowed, dutifully expressing the correct greetings for Tunis' young sister.

"How can I assist you?" she said patiently.

He dismissed her request, smiled faintly at her. "Rather, Madam, it is how we - " he indicated another man whom she could not claim to know - "might help you."

"I see." Laril carefully replaced the fruit, and placed the plate she had been holding back on the table. "There is something wrong?" The young woman tried to find her siblings in the crush of bodies, but was unable to find more than a flash of them through the link. She pressed for more information. "What's the matter, Riefenstahl?"

He shook his head in an urgent manner. "It would be... *most* unwise to speak of this here. As you will carry the line forward for the future, you must know of the plot to discredit your future mate."

Laril said nothing; she stilled her thoughts, sweeping the man and his companion. "What of him?"

"Not here. Please allow me and Dickinson to take you to the Ambassador and he will be able to tell you more."

She was not certain though she could sense no duplicity in him, in either of them. "Garr is where?"

The two Human males directed her attention away from the Holodeck to the exit, and led her away. It was too late when she realised she had been tricked, and that these were her uncle's creatures.



Laril attempted to fight them, but was no match for their strength, and she found herself removed bodily from the presence of all she held dear. Removed and deposited in a place where she found herself crushed. Laril gathered all the last dregs of her family's enormous willpower and screamed for help. Her mind chased the sibling link, smashing through the dullness caused by grief to reach her sister and brothers.

CARTHA!!! she screamed again. *MURDERER! TRAITOR!* And felt the power of four minds try to help her breath.

La Forge knew he should be at the dinner, but he was glad he had been able to make an excuse and escape back to engineering. Besides, he had something he wanted to check - something he had spent a lot of time and trouble on, and did not have any intention of letting slip. While he was there he could check the environmental controls were A.O.K. too, make certain there would not be any gravity flux to upset their visitors. He had almost convinced himself this was the reason he did not want to be there.

The sound of pounding feet caused him to turn his head, and he spotted an agitated Worf leading a party of Security personnel. As the Klingon drew up beside his friend, he growled, "Have you seen Laril, Geordi?"

The Chief Engineer cocked a brow at the big man as he fell into step. "No. Should I have?"

Worf grunted in reply, then said, "Her brother thinks she is here."

La Forge made a moue with his mouth. "Okay. Any idea where in engineering she might be?"

"A corridor was all the image Unalt gave Commander Riker," replied Worf, but he did not sound certain. "The accuracy of the image cannot be relied on, I think."

La Forge gave a slight nod of his head in comprehension - who knew how the Lavithians 'saw' their world? It would not be something anyone of his or Worf's species who could understand the different concepts a race, blind through an evolutionary jump, equipped with sonar and telepathy, would be able to determine. It was a wonder the Lavithians and the rest of the Federation had anything at all in common.

The Chief Engineer addressed Worf's concern. "Let's go look for her." He headed away from the Klingon, then stopped as something occurred to him. "Worf, was there anything else Unalt said which might give us an idea where she could've gone?"

"A description of pressure," the Klingon rumbled. "She could be anywhere the gravity is higher."

La Forge licked his lips. "Narrows it down to a couple of definite areas though." He continued on his way with his friend close on his heels.

They had reached the central area of engineering and were looking carefully at the table on which the diagram of the Enterprise was spread. The Chief of Security ran impatient fingers over the smooth surface. He scowled, then tapped a forefinger.

"There," he announced with certainty. A small blip on the otherwise pristine top showed

his accuracy.

Geordi peered at what the Klingon had found, and said, "Computer verifies an alien life-form in that section, Worf. C'mon, we'd better get to her; she's in an environment that'll make short work of her."

Worf nodded his agreement, and they both rushed off in the direction they now knew the alien female to be in.

The journey was short, and it was La Forge who heard the faint, almost muffled breathing, laboured and painful. He moved faster than he ever had before, swinging round the corner of the corridor to see a crumpled form desperately trying to break the grip of the gravity embracing her.

The Engineer took to his heels, slid to a halt and carefully, carefully pulled the tall slim form of Laril into his arms. She was all reed-fragile bones, soft furred skin, and agony. He headed back the way he had come, towards the safe haven of the lighter gravity field, and saw Worf waiting to welcome them.

"Is she alive?" Worf wanted to know, pragmatism, as always, first. He had searched the corridor, and found no clues, so wanted to talk to Laril as soon as she was able.

"Just," Geordi muttered as he carried his feather-like burden to safety and to life.

Reaching the interior of the engineering department again, La Forge carefully laid Laril to rest on the floor, gently arranging slender limbs into more natural poses, cautious in case she had sustained fractures to her bones.

The Klingon bent over their charge also, checking, probing, as precisely as possible under the circumstances, for those injuries not so immediately obvious. He grunted with a certain amount of satisfaction when he found nothing of note.

Slapping his insignia, Worf snapped, "Medical emergency, engineering." He felt Laril was probably fine, but it would do no harm to obtain a second opinion.

"Found the Lavithian?" asked Beverly Crusher momentarily in reply; her voice indicated her intensely felt relief.

"Yes," agreed Worf, and reeled off how the woman had been found and retrieved.

"Fine," approved Crusher. "I'm on my way."

Worf turned to the engineer. "Geordi, I must check with Commander Riker about this. I'd be grateful if you'd stay with Laril until I can question her about how she came to be in this place."

La Forge glanced up at his friend; his VISOR glinted in the light of the room, and he gave Worf a curt acknowledgement. "Sure. Just don't be too long." He spoke to the Klingon's retreating back, then regarded the woman lying on the floor. He got to his haunches, hunkered down beside her, and observed.

Laril's fingers twitched, and she gave a sudden moan, arching her back away from its flat, cold surface; her arms spasmed. The Engineer gripped her wrists as gently as he could so he could stop her from thrashing around - if that was what she was going to do - and possibly

causing herself damage. "Caa...rtha...!" she husked.

Interesting... something to pass on to Worf, the Engineer thought briefly, but said aloud, "You're okay." La Forge spoke softly, hoped he sounded reassuring. "Laril, you're safe now. Dr. Crusher'll be here soon and she'll get you to sickbay - "

"Geordi La Forge...?" Laril's voice whispered out of her throat, and she groaned as she took another still painful breath. "Ahhh, how... do you *stand*... the terrible... strength of your... world?" she wondered; her blind, beautiful face was wracked with agony still, and she took each breath as if it split her in two.

The Engineer shrugged. "Evolution, I guess." His dry comment was greeted by a faint touch in his mind, and then she lapsed into unconsciousness. Briefly La Forge considered checking the medics were on their way again, but managed to resist the temptation; he decided on watching the woman, to make certain this *was* just a lapse to unconsciousness and not something more sinister.

Picard glared at Garr with all the force he could muster. That this *diplomat* - the word acquired in his mind a degree of filth - had seen fit to embroil his crew, his ship, and himself in a political situation was... despicable! Unthinkable! And yet, it had happened. That they had been manipulated so easily...!

He deliberately turned his attention onto the clustered Lavithians, gathering the anger away to be used more efficiently, to channel it to better routes.

"Ambassador," he said finally, when he could trust himself to speak - absently he watched the Counselor attempting to comfort Tunis, Unalt and their brothers. "Ambassador, what do you know of this?" Even so, his voice was strained.

Garr's cold features travelled in his direction. "Picard, I... *we* owe you an explanation, but I am unable to provide it now. Please... let us be assured of Laril's safety before I offer one."

Picard snorted, and swung on his heel away from the man to make his way back to his First Officer. You *mean*, the thought flittered around his head in derisive accents, *let's check with Tunis before I dig a deeper hole for myself!* He thinned his mouth as he looked this way, then that, at the chaos reigning on the Holodeck. "Where," he snapped, "is Cartha?"

"Held," assured Riker swiftly; he finished addressing the security personnel who were present on the Holodeck before turning his attention back fully to Picard. "Worf managed to get him before he got away."

The Captain sucked a breath through clenched teeth, and tugged his uniform into place. "Good." He gazed at the Commander. "And the rest of Cartha's party?"

"Also detained, sir."

"Excellent, Number One. I think it's about time we got to the bottom of this, don't you?"

"If we can, sir," agreed Riker.

The Captain strode purposefully towards the Holodeck exit, beckoning his senior officers to follow, which they did. An insistent beeping broke the tense atmosphere.



Picard grunted impatiently. "Yes."

"Sir." It was Worf, and the deep voice hesitated fractionally before continuing. "We have found Laril."

"Alive, Worf?" asked Picard, not certain he found the tone of his Security Chief's voice promising.

"Yes, Captain," the Klingon responded, "and I'm pleased to report she does not seem to have taken any lasting ill from her exposure to a higher gravitational field, sir. Geordi has informed me of... further traitors, inspired by Cartha to act against the Ambassador, and ruin the reputation of the Federation for impartiality."

"On Garr's staff...?" Picard was not really surprised by the information; it had to have been the only way to cause such mayhem. He let out a faint sigh of relief. "Very good, Lieutenant. I'll meet you in sickbay with the siblings." He threw a quick glance over his shoulder at Riker. "We should all find what we're about to hear most intriguing."

"Aye, sir." The Security Chief sounded as if he concurred whole-heartedly with his Captain's appraisal. "Worf out."

Picard addressed the Commander. "Shall we go, Number One?"

Save for the sound of the Lavithians soft breathing as they gathered around their sister's bed, sickbay was remarkably quiet. The two younger brothers remained huddled about Laril as Tunis and Unalt broke away to speak with their host.

Crusher finished her observations with a satisfied nod and a quick flick of auburn hair from out of her eyes. "She's doing good," she announced, and smiled at a stern and palpably annoyed Captain. *He has every damn right to be*, she reflected sympathetically.

Tunis clasped her brother's hand, almost as if she sought courage from the contact. "Captain Picard, please will you listen to our explanation?"

Riker and Worf, who both stood at a slight distance from the major protagonists, glanced at each other, sharing the same feeling of distrust.

The Captain eyed the two Lavithians, pursed his mouth slightly - tightening it - which was the only way anyone could tell he was exceptionally displeased. "Madam, sir - " punctiliously polite, as always, he bowed - "I await your reasoning with pleasure. Please continue."

Tunis directed her face towards the familiar and much admired Human Ambassador, searching him for support. Garr was as angry as the Human Captain - he had been as much a pawn in the late Pelatar's scheme as Picard. She truly regretted the need to use an old and dear family friend in such an unkind manner, but sometimes the ends justified the means. And in this case they had been amply repaid.

"Please, Ambassador... Charles - " Tunis' voice held a faint plea, and the use of his given name caused Garr to start - "will you listen to my tale?"

Garr swung to face the Dut'vth, schooled his face into a distant mask. "Madam - " he

inclined his head graciously towards her - "both I and Captain Picard await your pleasure."

"Somewhere private?" she enquired, and Crusher jerked her head at her office. The three of them made their way over through the doors and Tunis broke from them to pace agitatedly around the small room.

She stopped long enough to throw a comment at them as they bided their time. "You must think us untrustworthy, and this grieves me greatly, but there was no other way."

"No other way?" Picard asked. He set his back against the chair he sat in, cocked his head and waited. The Ambassador assumed a similar posture.

Tunis halted altogether, stood stock still in front of them, and bowed her head. "No other way," she repeated. "My sire was murdered by poison, sirs. One which is rarely used in these enlightened times. It's distilled from the Thought Flower, and is very potent." She drew in a long breath. "Cartha's use of it was in accordance with the Old Ways, but unlooked for." The woman's features turned fierce and she exposed the sharp points of her teeth, then she bent forward to touch her head to her hands. "He did not reckon on Pelatar's foresight, and gravely miscalculated the bond present between me and mine. Charles... was - " Tunis held up a hand to forestall the Ambassador - "was an unwitting tool in the play for power. We hope you will understand..."

Garr fidgeted, ran a thoughtful hand through his iron-grey beard. "You should have told me," he said; his words held slight disapprobation, but had the faint tinge of understanding also.

"I could not, my friend," Tunis responded. "To have done so would have put your life in danger from Cartha - "

The Ambassador snorted, waved a hand under her nose. "As if I would consider that, my dear - "

Tunis interrupted in turn. "I know. But I needed you alive, Charles, and so did my father."

Picard had listened to the Dut'vth with interest, now *he* wanted some questions answered. "Pelatar knew of the plot to assassinate him?"

"Of course." Tunis sounded surprised he needed to ask the question. "It was in accordance with the ancient rite of Byath. Cartha's error lay in trying to separate my siblings and me, and kill Laril."

Picard managed a frown. "Laril's disappearance on this ship was actually a part of the plot to overthrow you and your family?"

"Yes, Captain Picard. It was." Tunis allowed some emotion over her striking features, the first that had not been contrived; she gave a short snort of derision. "He thought we would be so mind-blind after the death of our father, so numbed by our grief and his treachery, we would be unable to act. The sibling bond proved his undoing."

The Captain shook his head in bemusement. If anybody chose to ask him right now what he thought was going on, he could only answer with certainty that he knew there had been an attempted coup. The convoluted manner it had been put together fascinated him - such intrigue, and such method and purpose. His, though, was not to reason why. After all,

Garr seemed more than satisfied with the why and wherefore.

For respite he looked out of the doors into the main sickbay area, could see Troi communing with the other Lavithians over their sister. He sighed.

"You used us, Tunis. You used *me*," he said.

Tunis acknowledged the statement with a brief bending of her head. "I had no choice in the matter, Captain. The wheels had been set in motion long before I was of age." She drew closer to the chair Picard was sat in. "The poison of the Thought Flower is insidious. It takes many years of consistent use to kill its victim, and Pelatar was privy to the signs it engendered in him."

The Captain shook his head with distaste. He looked up at her. "Then surely Cartha was merely doing what he saw as his right?"

Tunis gave a short gasp, then smiled with pleasure. "Laril... beloved." She passed out of the office and made her way over to the biobed her sister lay on.

Picard cocked an eyebrow at his fellow Human, and they followed.

Worf was scowling at the scene as they drew closer to the Lavithians. He gave his Captain a brief nod, and stood back.

"Dr. Crusher," began Picard, "how is Laril?"

The Doctor tilted her head to one side, and folded her arms. "No lasting damage, Jean-Luc," she responded. "In fact, I'd say she's recovered remarkably swiftly, considering the trauma which could have resulted from her little excursion."

The patient moved her head in response to Crusher's words, and lifted her hands for her sister and brothers to take. She whispered, "Where is Geordi La Forge, beloved?"

"Engineering," replied Riker quickly, and found the sonar directed at him from all five of the siblings.

"We must have the Thought Flower we gave him to hold," Tunis murmured softly.

"Why?" asked the First Officer curiously.

They exchanged glances, and it was Garr who spoke up for them. "To... ease Cartha into the next world."

All the officers managed to appear shocked.

"We have him in custody," Worf growled. "He will be tried for the attempted murder of your sister -"

Tunis and Unalt exchanged something between them. A free trade of thoughts. They merely ignored the Security Chief, and addressed Picard, cutting into the Klingon's speech.

"It is *his* right, Captain, to choose the equal death. You cannot interfere. The Flowers are bred and held by only one blood-line; they are specific in their abilities to kill, and we have chosen Cartha to take the poison from ours. Hear us... its precarious nature is all the more

dangerous when it is retained by one not meant for it."

"Why Geordi? Because he's blind?" The Captain's further questions received only mute agreement.

Garr touched Picard briefly on the forearm. "What the Dut'vth says is true, Picard. It is their right - now! - to insist - *insist*, mark you, that Cartha die in the same manner as their sire. He has failed, and all he holds dear is forfeit."

The Captain scanned the Ambassador's features with the practised ease of a commander of men; he searched the unknown, a role not totally unfamiliar to him. He did not like it - he did not have to. This *was* outside his purview even though he and his had been pulled like marionettes.

Reluctantly, and to the surprise of his officers, he inclined his head. "Very well." He drew in a deep breath, huffed it out sharply, spoke to Worf. "See that Mr. La Forge returns the Thought Flower, Lieutenant, and - " he stopped for a moment; his jaw tightened before he continued - "also that the prisoners are turned over to the relevant Lavithian security forces."

The Security Chief's voice responded slowly. "Aye, Captain."

Tunis, Unalt, Laril and their brothers directed their faces towards the Human Captain. In concert he heard them exclaim their thanks. But... he *heard* none of it.

Picard stood and looked out of the long window set into the bulkhead of his ready room, leaned his hand against the strut and watched the globe of Lavith revolve steadily on its axis.

The entire affair with the Lavithian people had left a bitter taste in his mouth. It was an experience he would not care to repeat under any circumstances. One more thing to put down to experience, one more thing to remember.

A new sound distracted the Captain from his musing, and absently, in response to the door chime, he said, "Come."

He heard the door swish open, and close. "Guinan." He turned to see if he was correct. He was.

She strolled across the room, placed herself comfortably on the settee, and watched him steadily. "How are you feeling?" she asked.

Picard blew out a breath, and quirked his mouth at her wryly. "A little... overworked." They both made a game effort to smile at the subtle joke.

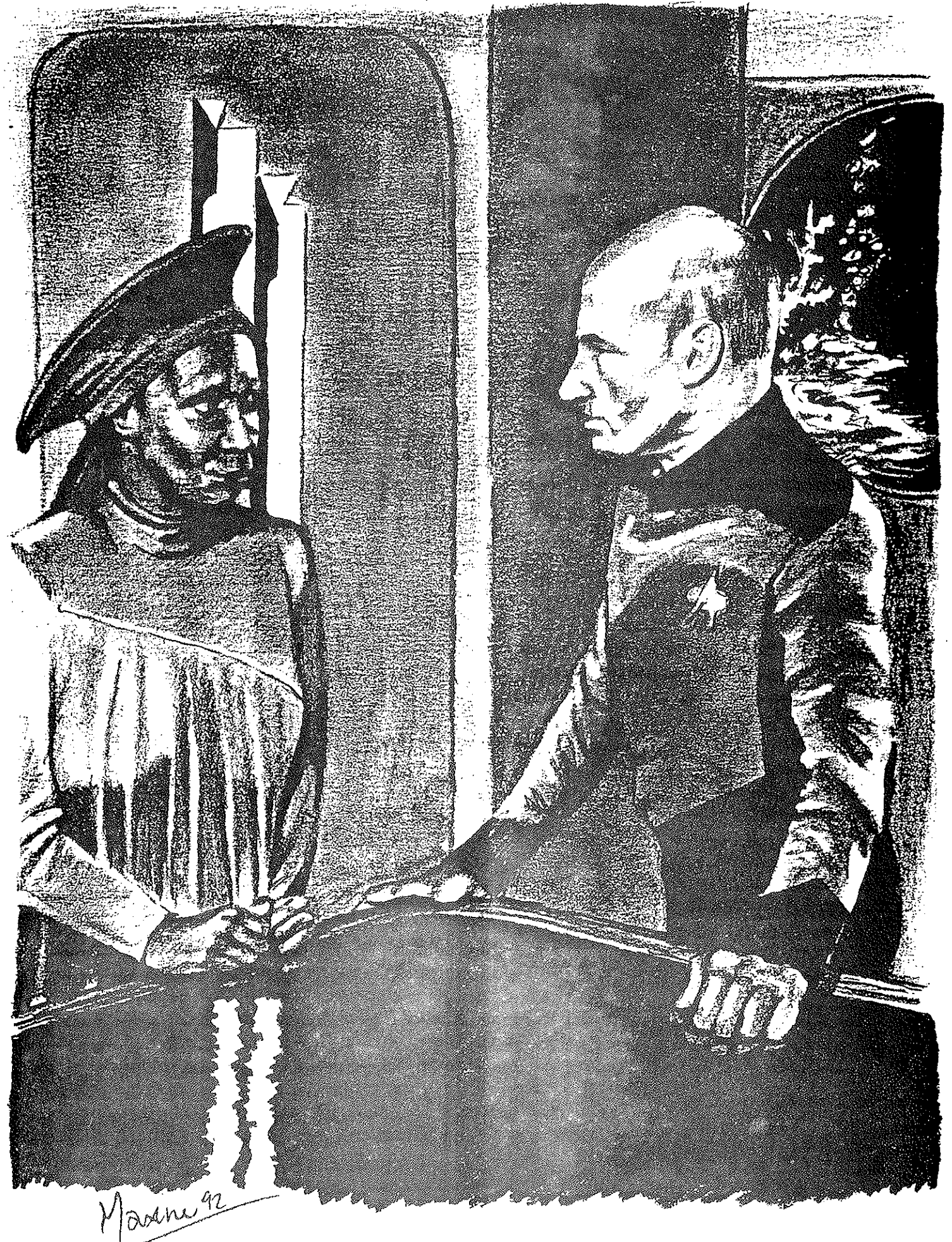
"You did what you had to," she reminded him.

Picard sighed, ran a hand over his eyes wearily. "So I'm told, Guinan. So I'm told."

"Sometimes, Captain, we're railroaded into circumstances we don't like - " Picard gave a grunt in reply - "and have to make the best of a bad situation." She gazed at the stiff shoulders, folded her hands neatly into her lap. "Don't be too hard on yourself."

Picard set his back a little straighter, and moved to join her. "Tea, Guinan?" he asked,

and she smiled at him.

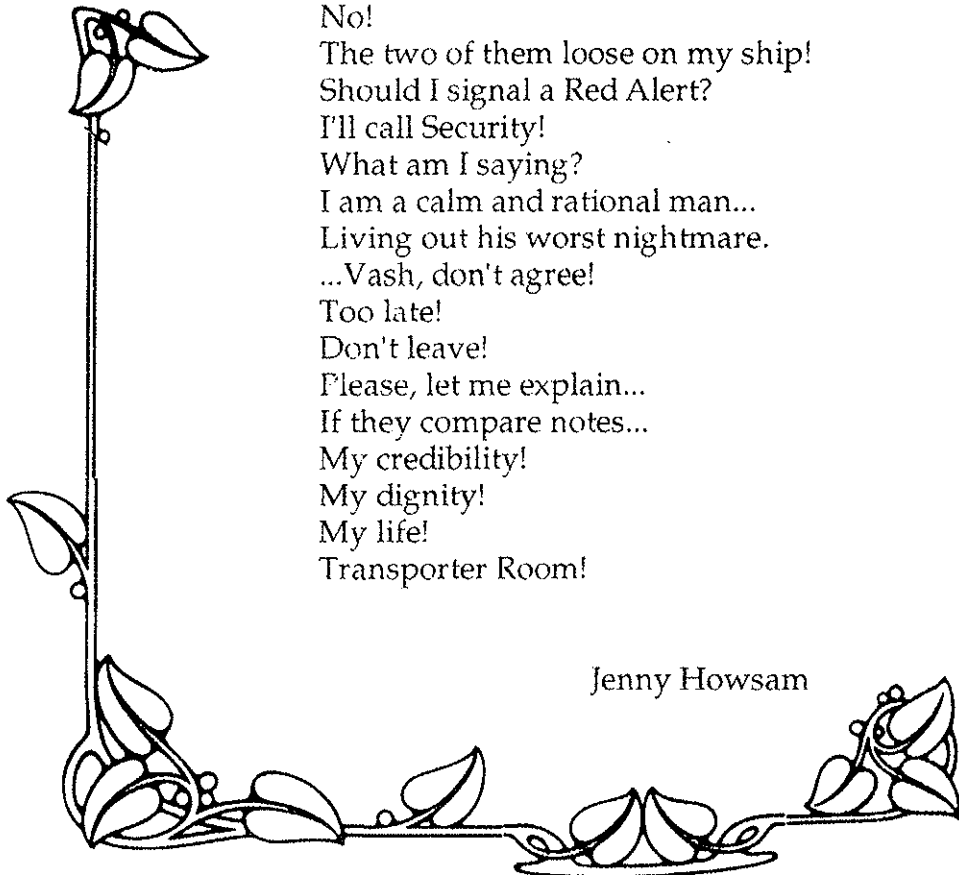


Maxine 92

CAPTAINS, DOCTORS AND ROGUE ARCHAEOLOGISTS

Beverly!
 Don't come in...
 Oh no...
 That's all I need!
 The two women I prayed
 Would never meet!
 My own personal
 Matter and Antimatter -
 Except this is more explosive!
 What will Vash say?
 What will Beverly say?
 If I get rid of her
 Will that only postpone...
 Oh God!
 ...When she gets me alone...
 What have I done to deserve this?
 Please...
 This isn't happening!
 What would Riker do?
 ...Escape!
 Oh no, not that tone!
 She's going to say something
 I'll regret...
 No!
 The two of them loose on my ship!
 Should I signal a Red Alert?
 I'll call Security!
 What am I saying?
 I am a calm and rational man...
 Living out his worst nightmare.
 ...Vash, don't agree!
 Too late!
 Don't leave!
 Please, let me explain...
 If they compare notes...
 My credibility!
 My dignity!
 My life!
 Transporter Room!

Jenny Howsam





LETTING GO

"What would you do?"

I had to ask the question but I know the answer:
forget it! 'Cos whatever you'd have done won't work for us - not now.
So this is what it feels like, when the buck stops here:
the 'big man' in the big chair.

It's not how I imagined I would get here and
it sure as hell is *not* the time I would have chosen to arrive!

But Shelby's wrong -

I know that I *can* make the big decisions. Only problem is
I'm not sure that they'll be the right ones.

I know there never can be any guarantees -
that every Captain takes his life and those of all his crew
into his hands with every choice he makes.

But there's much more at stake here and this ship, this crew,
are only the beginning ...

If I screw up, there won't be any Federation left to serve.

Guinan was right. It would be easier if you were dead
and not suspended in some sort of living hell,

performing this macabre nightmare; sent
to crush the crew's morale before the fight's begun.

And every time the Borg tug at your strings, I know it's working -
I can see it in their eyes...

But if it's this bad looking on,

what must it be like from the inside looking out?

Dear God, I hope you *don't* know what you're doing -
to yourself and all of us...

She said that everyone believes

they're going to die tomorrow and I know it's true
that only I can turn their bleak despair around
and give them hope.

Somehow I know you are the answer;

that I must use you, just as they have done,
despite the fact I may destroy

whatever chance of life that you have left.

But first, from somewhere deep inside

I have to find the cold detachment needed to survive.

Lee Sansome



LOST AND FOUND

by

Debbie Lee

ONE

Captain's Log stardate 50291.2: The Enterprise has been summoned urgently to the Batta V system. The central star has always been known to be particularly young and dense, and indeed some objection was made to initial settlement within its system. Now it has realised its unstable potential, and is showing an unfortunate trend in activity that makes evacuation the only option.

Lt Worf and Doctor Beverly Crusher are co-ordinating the evacuation.

Beverly Crusher walked around the groups of colonists awaiting transportation and approached Lt Worf as he directed his security staff about their duties. The nudges of the colonists and their wide-eyed regard of the tall Klingon figure prompted Dr Crusher to hide a smile despite the gravity of the situation involving the evacuation of the colony, and the fact they were 30 minutes behind schedule already.

"Doctor." Worf acknowledged her superior rank with a slight nod of his head, deference to a superior innately Klingon. "You have completed the third quadrant?"

"Indeed, and found two additional family groups. I am concerned that the colony leaders do not appear to have made the seriousness of the situation particularly clear. Ideally everyone should have been accounted for long before we even arrived." Dr Crusher took Worf's low growl to be in agreement.

"It means more wasted time tracking down stragglers," Worf observed with sorely practised resignation and patience coming to the fore -

These NOT being innately Klingon characteristics, thought Beverly wryly. "I'll start with the 4th quadrant, you can join me once you have finished this batch of transportations if you like." She swung her medical bag onto her shoulder and reset her tricorder.

Worf watched her pick her way around the waiting groups of people, her red hair like a beacon amidst the mainly brown hair of the Terran colonists. Normally a minimum of two would be sent out per search party, but the lack of organization on Batta V had caught the Enterprise evacuation team unawares and single-personnel, armed search parties were the order of the day. But it did not necessarily mean that Worf had to like the idea. "Doctor - you have got your phaser?"

Beverly Crusher did not even look up, she just lifted her phaser from her belt and waved it above her head as she continued on her way. Worf grunted and shook his head. *Humans!* It was on that thought that he continued with the arduous job of moving almost 700 people onto

the Enterprise.

"Status, Mr Data?"

Captain Picard sat in the big chair, one leg slightly forward, his chin resting on his fingers as he had been listening to his Second in Command's quietly spoken words for about the last five minutes. Commander Riker sat on the Captain's right, on his left sat Counselor Troi, also of Commander rank but so rarely in standard Starfleet uniform issue that her three pips seemed to many just a distant memory.

"We have been monitoring the surface activity of the central Batta V sun, and it would appear that previous reports of its moving rapidly out of its stable sequence are correct, sir, if a little conservative."

"It is a particularly large star, Mr Data," Picard observed, looking at the image on the main viewscreen with shrewd interest.

"Indeed, sir, and large mass stars are known to evolve considerably faster than smaller ones, a case in point being -"

"Thank you, Mr Data," Picard murmured repressively. "Are communications and transportation function still being affected by the activity on Batta V's surface?"

"Yes, sir. In addition, sensor readings are now showing deviation."

"Understood, Mr Data. Can you give us a time limit for our stay?"

"With regard to the interference with ship's functions and radiation levels from Batta V itself - I would not recommend that the Enterprise stay at this proximity to Batta V above 2 hours. In 13 hours time, I believe this area of space, including the colony planet, will be unsafe to approach even with shields set at maximum."

"That does not give us long to complete the evacuation, Captain," Riker pointed out. He then tapped his communicator. "Riker to La Forge. Can you report on the status of the transporter beam power?"

"La Forge here, Commander. We seem to be doing OK, sir - at the moment. We have managed to boost power temporarily to overcome circuit resistance due to the Batta V firework display, but O'Brien has noticed that the effect seems to be getting worse with time. Hopefully we will have everyone aboard before boosted power becomes a problem. Hope that is satisfactory."

"That's great, Geordi, keep up the good work." Riker turned in his chair to the Captain who raised an eyebrow at his perturbed look.

"Now comes the hardest part, Number One - the sitting and the waiting," he said.

Dr Crusher made her way slowly down the deserted main thoroughfare of the once thriving colony town, scanning before her with her tricorder in a wide sweep. Her years in Starfleet had made her patience with bad organization short; the risk these people had been

put at because of the lack of vision of their leaders made her furious. The sky had a curious pink tinge to it, *which would be quite pretty did it not hint at the forthcoming threat*, Beverly decided, and she looked down at her Tricorder once more - and it blipped. The Doctor froze and repeated her sweep, and sure enough there it was again - faint but clearly distinguishable.

"Ok, so where might you be hiding?" she muttered to herself, turning and starting off in the direction of her quarry. The signs were getting stronger and stronger as she moved towards the door of what appeared to be some form of disused storage facility.

"Hello? Hello - anybody in there?" she called out. Beverly opened the door wide and ventured inside. It was dark, dusty and giving exceptionally clear readings on the tricorder. Dr Crusher moved around the edge of the building but did her best to stay by the door.

"Well I'm not coming in there after you, whatever you are," Dr Crusher muttered crossly. "I might look really stupid - but I'm not."

She stopped by the open doors and hit her communicator, which chirped but did not raise anyone. "Worf? Worf, do you read? Enterprise?" Dr Crusher shook her head. "Anyone? Can you hear me?"

All she got was a snatch of static. Wonderful.

"Where is technology when you need it most?" she muttered. Tucking her tricorder under her arm, she removed her communicator and moved more into the light of the door. "Could it be the construction of the facility itself?" Crusher queried aloud.

The walls looked fairly standard. They were metal but did not look too exceptional to her and the communicator also looked fine. Of course the tricorder could tell her much more than she could simply observe, and she moved towards the wall with it in her hand. Suddenly her progress was stopped. Beverly twisted to see what was impeding her and saw her med coat snagged upon a piece of hooked and jagged metal. With a curse, she pulled it hard but the only sound was of a slight rending of the material as it snagged even more effectively about what had caught it. "Great," Beverly observed.

Then it happened. A blast of air and debris from within the facility threw Dr Crusher to the ground, anchored as she was to that position by her coat, and covering her with dust, grit and all manner of matter. Her communicator spun from her fingers and was thrown out onto the street by the blast; the tricorder fared little better, falling to the floor after hitting the door frame full on.

And then there was silence.

"Status of the evacuation, Mr Worf?" But Riker got no response. The exchanged looks of Captain and First Officer gave a clear message to the bridge crew that maybe these two gentlemen of action had now had enough of the 'sitting' and the 'waiting'.

"Mr Data, see if you can raise Mr Worf," Picard instructed his officer at ops. "La Forge - is everything all right at your end? Are the transportations proceeding to your satisfaction?"

"Aye, sir. We are having a problem with boosting the power sufficiently, but we are about to bring up our last batch of colonists and then only the Enterprise evacuation team is left. I would say, however, that what time we did have is running out faster than we expected

for some reason."

"Have you had any problems with communications to the surface, Geordi?" Picard was studying the view of Batta V's sun without interest.

"I'd say. We have had to reset communication frequency and then boost it by the same factor as the transporter just to keep in contact with Worf at the co-ordinates!"

"And that factor is now?" Picard asked.

"A factor of 2.5," Data replied, keying more information into his console. "It will be possible to sustain these levels for no more than 30 minutes."

The small group had made their way down the otherwise empty thoroughfare, their steps hurried and the Starfleet security personnel with them anxious, as they drew nearer to the set co-ordinates.

"Please keep up, we must hurry. You are sure that you are the last people in quadrant four? You have not seen anyone else?"

The adults in the group all shook their heads, their faces dark with anxiety and concern, their children bewildered. That was, apart from Katy, a small child with a shock of curly brown hair and ebony bright eyes - she, in contrast, looked very excited. Katy had just found treasure lying in the street, real treasure half hidden by the dust. Her toe had knocked it as her mother dragged her along in an effort to keep up with the last of the remaining colonists in this final party. Her daughter had managed to pick up her treasure quickly before she could be dragged on again - it was a gold circle with a curious 'A' on the top. Treasure indeed.

"Warp 5. Engage."

The whine of the Enterprise as it readjusted its course and engaged its engines to achieve the required speed was a comforting feeling. At last they were doing something, going somewhere, achieving something, instead of just sitting there.

"Heading 00.5, Warp 5, course set for Starbase 775, Captain." Data scanned his console quickly as bridge relief came to relieve the post adjacent to his own.

"Thank you, Mr Data." Picard stood easily, even though he had not moved from his post for some time. "If I am needed, I will be in my Ready Room. You have the bridge, Number One."

"Sir." Riker acknowledged the hand-over and moved to the Captain's chair as Picard left, adjusting its angle to accommodate his long frame better. Just as he had got comfortable, the turbolift doors opened and Deanna Troi walked purposefully down to her position, her flowing blue dress accentuating her neat, sleek build as she settled herself into her chair. She sat there for a few moments before tapping her communicator badge

"Troi to Crusher." There was no answer. Deanna frowned. "Troi to Sickbay."

"Counselor?" It was Dr Selaar's voice, as cool and composed as always.

"Dr Selaar, has Dr Crusher reported to Sickbay?"

"No, Counselor, we have not seen Dr Crusher since the evacuation of Batta V. She may still be working with the colonists though - there have been extensive reports of radiation exposure coming in and most of our medical staff are at present on duty on the quarantine decks."

"Thank you, Dr Selaar." Troi shook her head, a small smile on her face. Typically Beverly Crusher, still at work despite finishing a back breaking 14 hour evacuation plan. "Computer, could you tell me the whereabouts of Dr Crusher, please?"

"Dr Crusher is on the second deck allocated to quarantine of the colonists."

"Problem, Counselor?" William Riker used her official title as he looked across from his position in the Captain's chair.

"No, not really. I will give it 30 minutes, and then if Dr Crusher has not retired to her quarters I will leave the bridge to dispense a little professional advice."

"Good idea," agreed Riker. Both of them were well aware of the Chief Medical Officer's tendency to push herself far harder than she would ever dream of pushing her medical staff.

"Mr Worf, have you prepared your status report on the evacuation of the colonists?" Riker asked.

"Yes, sir," the Klingon replied.

With that Riker climbed to his feet and went round to talk to the Chief of Security, and Deanna Troi settled herself back into her chair to wait out the next 30 allotted minutes in her daily schedule.

Dr Crusher could feel only sandy grit, over her face, up her nose, in her ears, sealing her eyes shut. Her neck itched, her back itched, her hands felt dry and her head hurt. A voice unfamiliar in cadence but familiar in tone went around and around in her head.

"The sons of the prophet were valiant and bold.
And quite unaccustomed to fear,
But of all the most reckless,
Or so I am told -
Was Abdul Abulbul Ameer..."

The thirty minutes was up. Deanna was standing in the turbolift from the bridge on the twenty five minute mark, and passing through security onto the quarantine decks on the twenty ninth minute. Due to the speed at which the colonists had had to be removed from the planet, and their potential vulnerability to viruses amongst the Enterprise crew (as well as vice versa), the decision had been made to transport them directly to prepared quarantine decks aboard the Starship Enterprise, overriding scans normally made for infectious bacterial life forms and also decontamination - which actually speeded up the transporter function by at least a third and saved vital capacity.

Troi tapped her communicator again, as computer access at this point in the Enterprise was somewhat limited.

"Computer, exact location of Dr Beverly Crusher, please."

"Dr Beverly Crusher is on quarantine deck 2. Starboard side. Aft section. Cabin Area 10."

"Confirm my present location."

"You are at present on quarantine deck 2. Starboard side. Aft section, between entrances to Cabin Area 10 and Cabin Area 11."

"This," Deanna said to herself, "does not feel right."

"Insufficient data to compute," replied the computer.

"End enquiry," Troi told the computer abruptly.

She touched the door comm, and waited for its hail to complete before talking. "Hello, I am Ship's Counselor Deanna Troi. Is my colleague Dr Beverly Crusher there?"

The door opened almost immediately to reveal a petite woman with a lot of black hair drawn back into a pony tail, her clothes like those belonging to someone who worked the land for a living.

"No, I am sorry. There's only myself and my husband - oh, and my daughter Katy."

"Ah." Deanna tried to think of a polite way to gain entrance; she somehow needed to check, for how could the computer be wrong? She wished she had not made it so obvious that she was looking for the Doctor. "And how is Katy?"

"Fine, fine..." Suddenly the woman seemed to realise who she was talking to and drew back to allow Deanna through the door. "Please do come in. We were so relieved when we finally got off the planet - we were the last, you know. Horrible. I would not wish to go through that terrible journey from our home to town, for anything, ever again."

A small girl ran through from the sleeping quarters, but on seeing a stranger she hid behind her mother's legs.

"Hello. You must be Katy. My name is Deanna." Troi crouched to talk to the child on her level. But there was no answer.

"She tends to be very shy around strangers." Her fond mother smiled and Deanna straightened up, starting to walk back to the cabin door.

"Oh well - I had better continue my search for the Doctor then." She smiled. "I am sorry to have troubled you, - ?"

"Rosie... Rosie Keva." As she spoke, Mrs Keva swung Katy up into her arms and it was then that Deanna's heart plummeted at the sight of what Katy was holding in her small fist. She was chewing the corner of it.

"Mrs Keva, what has Katy got there?"

"I am not too sure. She picked it up from somewhere as we were leaving the colony, and I haven't been able to prize it away from her yet"

"Could you try, Mrs Keva - please." When Deanna saw the young mother hesitate, she added, "I think it may be the reason that our ship's computer thinks the Doctor is here - and if that is the case, we need to know now."

After much cajoling, Katy was persuaded to surrender her prize and Deanna returned to the corridor with the communicator in her hand.

"Computer - state the present location of Doctor Beverly Crusher."

"Doctor Beverly Crusher is on quarantine deck 2. Starboard side. Aft section, between entrances to cabin area 10 and cabin area 11."

"Computer - state my present location."

"Identical location to Dr Crusher - quarantine deck 2. Starboard - "

"Thank you, that is all I need to know."

Deanna closed her eyes and took three deep breaths before hitting her communicator again.

"Troi to Picard."

"Picard to Counselor. Proceed."

That meant the Counselor could talk candidly without fear of being overheard. "Captain - I have good reason to believe that Dr Crusher is still on the Batta V colony... "

The Enterprise went to red alert almost immediately and all engines were duly signalled to come to a full stop as the bridge and essential crew reported to the conference room. Picard sat at the head of the table, his face grave as he waited for all those called to the meeting to sit before imparting his news. Riker had initially jumped as if a Talarian space rat had bitten him upon hearing Picard's words, and the brief time lapse before the meeting had done little to quell his anger.

"How the hell did we manage to leave one of our most senior officers behind?" His disbelief was almost a tangible presence at the conference table. "How... I cannot believe that we just sort of accidentally sailed off without the CMO on board!"

"Will." Deanna quietly shook her head. "Will, calm down."

"I will not calm down, Counselor." He paced down the length of the long room, one hand to his head. "I cannot believe this. Pinch me, someone. Say I will wake up. I am First Officer of this ship! I am responsible, Deanna, how the hell can I possibly calm down?"

"Commander."

By now the whole of the meeting's attention was focussed upon Commander Riker, with the exception of Worf, who appeared to have taken the news very badly indeed, and the Captain, who appeared to be concentrating his attention on the hands steepled before him. "Will," he continued, "please sit down. If anyone is ultimately responsible for this it is I, as

Captain of this vessel."

"Permission to speak." Worf stood like a man about to face a firing squad, or a Klingon about to make a disgraceful admission. "It is I who am to blame. I should have checked personally that the Doctor was aboard when we left, particularly as I did not see her return from her reconnaissance of the fourth quadrant on Batta V colony."

"I suggest we stop this right now," Troi snapped. "There is nothing to gain from trying to shoulder the blame, so stop it!"

There was a rather surprised silence, and then the Captain said, after clearing his throat, "The Counselor is of course correct. What we need to do now is to work out how we are going to retrieve our CMO from the Batta V colony, bearing in mind that the sun's present activity has forced us to evacuate 700 people from its vicinity."

"To return to the colony now means an increased risk factor, sir, maybe even higher once the time taken to actually return to Batta V is taken into consideration." Data's genial voice pointed out the danger with unrelenting pleasantness. "Furthermore, disruption to Communication and Transportation due to the stellar activity and debris could render us unable to render assistance or mount a rescue mission when we arrive."

"Then we will land a shuttle! Dammit, Data, we cannot leave Dr Crusher to perish from radiation without at least trying!" Riker argued.

"Commander, I am not advocating a course of action. The Captain appears to wish to retrieve the Doctor, I am seeking only to facilitate this by pointing out those obstacles - "

"Yes, thank you, Mr Data." The Captain sat back in his chair and gave a deep sigh. "You are of course right, Data, as is Commander Riker. Time is of the essence - as is of course the safety of our 1000 crew and 700 Batta V guests."

Captain Picard stood and walked slowly to the view from the conference room, where the outside stars stood eerily still. The eyes of his immediate crew were all upon him as he stared at the myriad lights for a few silent moments before taking a deep breath and squaring his shoulders as he made his decision.

"Prepare for saucer separation. It is far too risky to take the whole ship back to Batta V with 700 additional lives on board - the saucer section can continue to Starbase 775 under impulse power. The stardrive section will return to Batta V to retrieve the Doctor."

The rest of the crew looked at each other in agreement. Riker was back on his feet the moment the meeting started to break up.

"Number One," the Captain called to his First Officer as he looked as if he was about to leave the room. "A moment, please."

Riker stood by his chair as the others filed out, Troi the last to go. She glanced back at the two men before she finally stepped from the room and allowed the door to close behind her.

"Number One - volunteers only for this mission. It is too risky to expect someone to go anywhere near that star system now simply because they have been ordered to do so. Let us not compound this one mistake with any others. And..."

"Yes, Captain?"

"I will command the stardrive section on this mission." This of course left Commander Riker in command of the saucer. There was a long silence, before the Captain spoke again. "I expected a long argument, Commander."

"Well, I could give you one. Would you listen?"

"Don't I always?"

"All right, then - would you listen, take note and abide by my recommendation regarding the safety of Starship Captains and downright dangerous missions? I think you are already aware of what I will say."

"In that case, probably not." Picard turned about and looked at the stars. "I am putting the stardrive section and those who accompany me at extreme risk, Will. If anything happens it may be easier if I am at the sharp end on this one."

"Easier for whom? And Captain, there is something... *someone* else," Riker said quietly.

"Dieu... Of course, Wesley." The two men stood in unhappy contemplation for some moments before the Captain finally broke from his reverie with another one of his long, deep sighs. "Starfleet will of course have to be informed of our mishap. It is only fair that I contact Wes at the same time and apprise him of the situation. He is a resilient young man - I am sure he will not worry unduly."

"As you think best, sir," Commander Riker replied somewhat woodenly.

"Yes, Number One. I too can hear the echo of history trying to repeat itself. But I am going to do my damndest not to let it. Notify those members of the crew who may prove useful that it is volunteers only and that they are not obliged to agree to go."

Riker left Captain Jean Luc Picard standing alone against the stars, confident that the Captain would have exactly the crew he wanted, as there was not one of them aboard the Enterprise who would not follow him loyally to the end of the universe and back again without question, whatever the danger.

Dr Crusher's head was spinning. Curiously enough, with her eyes shut it felt as if she was floating backwards - however, as time went on and her full senses returned she could feel a hard cool floor beneath her shoulder blades and hips, her head aching slightly where it lay upon the unyielding surface. Her eyelids felt physically leaden. *It's going to take me one hundred years to even get my eyes open*, Beverly told herself, but slowly she blinked awake into a dim starlit world. Not daring to move she kept blinking her eyes, and tried to take in as much as she could without moving her head. She appeared to be in what looked like a makeshift hold, a hold which had once been spacious quarters if one went by the huge windows which formed one wall, revealing a glorious (and even more interestingly, moving) starscape without. She was surrounded by the most curious bits and pieces; not that Dr Crusher could see much, as the hold was in total darkness save for the starlight from the outside, and although her eyes adjusted to the dimness, large sections of her surroundings remained shrouded in a seemingly impenetrable sheet of blackness.

Feeling rather stiff, Dr Crusher wiggled her toes, and then her fingers. Nothing much wrong there. With some effort she managed to throw first one arm out flat onto the floor for some leverage to get her off her back, and then the other - only to have it come into contact

with something rough, callused and warm. Any problems moving her limbs were suddenly negated as she scrambled stiffly to her feet, her breath coming in short gasping sobs as she backed away from the 'thing' in her best imitation of controlled panic. Beverly put her hand to her throat and felt a pulse beating wildly. *If I open my mouth*, she thought with grim humour, *it feels as if my heart is just going to leap right on out*. But the hold stayed silent; the thing did not move and Beverly took several deep breaths before spotting that her tricorder had been left next to what looked like her med bag. Instantly, she looked down for her communicator, but it was conspicuously absent, so running her fingers absentmindedly through her thick chestnut hair, Beverly hesitantly moved back towards her original position with a brave sigh. Once the tricorder was in her hand, Beverly felt much better - *almost in control*, she told herself. The tricorder had survived whatever had happened with a few scuffs but no apparent harm to its internal mechanism; Starfleet equipment was, after all, built with the expectation of a long, hard but useful life. Her phaser was gone; it would appear that whoever had brought her here was capable of recognising phaser and communicator technology - not a particularly reassuring thought, particularly as they had seen fit to confiscate both.

The tricorder revealed her mysterious companion to be showing definite life signs, but as it had a conspicuously non-humanoid shape, Dr Crusher could not conjecture much in addition to the facts the tricorder told her. Approximately two metres in length, the being displayed no limbs and showed no clear delineation between head, thorax and abdomen like most other commonly classified advanced animal life forms. Its epidermis was brown in colour, thick, with an almost leather-like toughness and from what the Doctor could see, no opening of any type in its length and breadth. It was like examining a huge, over-sized old Earth cigar, with a body heat of 40 degrees centigrade and a tendency to pulsate almost convulsively for half a minute in every five.

Having ascertained she was in no immediate danger from her strange companion, Beverly turned her attention to her confinement. She spotted what looked like the main doors and moved over to its control panel.

"Open." Nothing. Perhaps it was not voice activated - but then again there was a definite lack of instrumentation present that would suggest the use of a hand or a keyed in sequence.

"Open door." Of course it was also possible that it was programmed in a language other than Terran, Beverly thought philosophically, and then racked her brain to remember 'open' in as many foreign tongues as she could.

"Achtow." Nothing

"Pac-tagh." Nothing. Beverly scratched her head and tried, "Ouma!"

The door remained insultingly shut. She sighed in resignation and then turned her back to the door and cast her eyes about her gloomy surroundings once more. Then on one wall she discerned a small recess. A replicator? She swiftly stepped over and stood back a little. It looked familiar, but she did not recognize the symbols on its fascia as she dusted it off. *From the dull glow of the fascia panel, it would still appear to be functioning*, she thought hopefully.

"Water...6 degrees C," She said clearly

A faint glow, and the machine replied to her request by producing a vessel of fuming red liquid that smelt almost as bad as it looked.

"Oh, yuk. That is not water," Beverly observed glumly, "and if that is how you interpret

the request for water, I am certainly not going to attempt to ask you to get rid of it."

She took a deep breath, and then another, and another, before saying to herself in a heartening tone, "Come on, Dr Beverly Crusher, you have been in worse fixes than this and have come through. Think positive!"

Yes, she must think positive!

The alien rolled to one side as she returned to where it lay - revealing a long gash leaking yellow, sweet smelling ooze into a small puddle on the floor.

"Sir, we have reached the last known location of Dr Crusher based on where the communicator was found by the evacuating colonists." Commander Data strode easily towards the large storage facility, followed by Geordi La Forge, who appeared fascinated by the remains of the facility's doors as they lay broken on the ground.

"Mr Data, bear in mind we have a strict time limit on this excursion. The Batta V dust debris is disturbing the integrity of our shields, and we must all be cautious of radiation levels - particularly you, Mr La Forge." Picard's voice was somewhat distorted by static over the communicators.

"Understood, sir." Data moved to Geordi's side. "Anything, Geordi?"

"This damage is recent, Data." Geordi moved closer, his VISOR giving much more detail on the physical and chemical makeup of the facility door than Human eyesight, or even Data's, could discern. "In fact this damage is very, very recent. It appears to have been caused by some form of blast - the source of which was in there." He indicated the inside of the storage facility. Both Data and La Forge peered inside. A huge girder blocked their path, at which point Data signalled La Forge to one side and braced his exceptional strength against it to push it away enough to allow them a small amount of access. La Forge shook his head. It never ceased to amaze him how Data's very slight, almost modest, android build hid such amazing power.

"Glad you are on our side, Data," he said, smiling as he slipped through the small gap. Data looked after him, puzzled for a moment, then shrugged and followed his friend and colleague through the gap.

The interior was very grimy, but not as full as it might have been at the time of the blast, as was quickly pointed out by La Forge as he studied the dusty floor with intense interest

"See the imprints here... here... and here. There were obviously large objects shielding the ground at the time of the blast that have since been removed, somehow." La Forge shrugged. "Curious. Captain, are you getting all this?"

"Affirmative, Mr La Forge. Life signs?"

"Negative, sir." Data swept the interior of the facility with the tricorder. "At first it seemed possible that the curious nature of the construction of this storage facility was somehow shielding its contents from the tricorder sweep and the ship's sensors."

He repeated his sweep once more, resetting its sensitivity. "But there are definitely no life forms potentially identifiable as Dr Crusher."

There was a hiss of static from the communicators. Data and Geordi exchanged wary looks.

"Sorry, Enterprise, we do not copy," Data said.

"I repeat. Could results be subject to the increasing radiation field emanating from the Batta V sun, Data?" Picard's voice was becoming more distorted by the moment.

"Possible, Captain, but not probable. I would state a 97% probability that there are no life forms potentially identifiable as..."

"Thank you, Mr Data. Proceed with a visual search as far as you can."

The frustration at not being able to beam down personally to search was apparent in the Captain's voice even through the rising static.

La Forge and Data continued to search, La Forge shaking his head and showing some puzzlement at the remaining pieces around them.

"This is a very strange selection of items to find on a colony such as this. Why would anyone have such a thing as a Klingon replicator casing here?"

Data was examining an object on the other side of the facility as he answered. "Indeed Geordi... almost as curious as a Vulcan engineered hull panel. Damaged," he observed thoughtfully.

"If, gentlemen, the two of you have completed as thorough a search as possible it would appear to be time for us to leave." The Captain's voice sounded terse and distant with the atmospheric disturbance. "Radiation levels are becoming excessive. In addition, the Batta V dust debris has distorted shield integrity to such an extent that we have been forced to channel all non-essential power to the shield generators in order to keep them up. Wrap up the search."

"Radiation levels are becoming excessive, Geordi," agreed Data, studying his tricorder. "It would appear to be a judicious time to go."

"Give me another few moments to walk around this place, Data. I just want to see if I can find anything that could give us a clue as to what happened to Dr Crusher."

"Sir, Geordi is doing a final sweep before we leave. Are the ship's sensors still also indicating no additional Human life forms?" Data asked the Captain.

"The sensors indicate one Human life form down there - presumably Mr La Forge. I think, Data, that we can safely say that our further presence here is of no use."

"Agreed, Captain," Data replied.

"Data!" Geordi's voice came from somewhere near the door of the storage facility. "Data, I think I may have found something here!"

Data reached Geordi's side in just two steps, to find him carefully placing a piece of blue cloth into one of the foil sample bags stored on the side of the tricorder. "I found it wrapped around that shard of metal over there. I am no great expert on textiles, but there's something about the fibres in Dr Crusher's medical coat that always catches my attention. I think this - "

he waved the small sample bag to emphasize his statement - "may be worth some extra study."

"Captain Picard, the Away Team of two preparing to beam up," reported Commander Data. "Clearing the facility now."

Dr Beverly Crusher moved her tricorder to sweep it over the alien once more. Its temperature had dropped, and the convulsive pulsating movements were becoming infrequent and erratic.

"What the hell do I know about your physiology?" she snapped helplessly at the alien's prone form, studying the 'wound'. "If I suture this up, is it going to be like sealing a Human tear duct or stitching up a humanoid's mouth or eyelids?"

Dr Crusher started sorting through her med bag, and then with a snort of frustration emptied it out onto the hold deck. She must have a medical sensor in there somewhere, dammit, she normally went everywhere with at least two.

When her eyes finally found the small slim cylinder, she pounced on it with a satisfied yelp of triumph, snatching it from the floor with nimble fingers.

"OK... let's have a darned good look at exactly what is oozing out here, buddy," Dr Crusher muttered fiercely, "and for good measure we'll examine the rate of metabolic activity around that hole. My bet is that it will display abnormally high rates compared to the rest of you, and hopefully that's going to be a pretty good set of grounds for assuming it should not be there!"

She pored over her instruments with intense curiosity, aware she was latching on to this project in order to escape the anxiety and boredom generated by her as yet unexplained captivity.

As she had thought, the difference in readings displayed an interesting correlation to those seen in more familiar tissue, and lent some weight to her original premise.

"So you thought you were so different you could fool the Doctor, did you, Bud?" she chided her odd patient. "Well, not so fast. We have the physician, we have the time - and the technology." She then glanced doubtfully at the contents of her med bag scattered over the deck, before adding, "Maybe."

It was at this point that her ears detected the almost silent swish of what could only be the hold doors. Beverly froze, her initial reaction one of intense trepidation at meeting her captor. But Starfleet training and experience got her onto her feet and slipped that ice cool familiar mask of composure over her features as she turned to face the visitor.

Footsteps sounded on the cool metallic floor. Definite and sure, coming slowly and purposefully towards her as she stood next to her medical debris and mysterious patient. The dimly lit hold with its tall, crated contents threw oddly shaped shadows that all but concealed her 'host' from view, despite Beverly's frowning with concentration in an attempt to interpret the grey form that stopped some distance from her. There followed a silence that Dr Crusher was the first to break.

"Why have you brought me aboard this vessel?"

Beverly waited for a response, but the shadowy figure remained quiet.

"Who are you?" Still no answer. "I demand to know why I am being held aboard this vessel. I am a Starfleet officer; to hold me in this manner is an act of aggression against an agent of the United Federation of Planets."

No response. Dr Crusher folded her arms and regarded her silent visitor with tired resignation and no little irritation. "I get it. You do not understand a word I am saying, do you? Like your wretched replicator, no doubt!"

"Oh, no." The voice from the shadows was clear, pleasant and very cultured. "On the contrary, Dr Crusher, I understand your every word."

"How... that is..." Dr Crusher cleared her throat before finally saying with icy composure, "I am afraid you have me at a disadvantage."

"And that, I trust, dear Doctor, is the way it is going to stay."

From the shadows stepped a slimly built figure dressed in a rough spun jacket with a wide belt, durable trousers and soft leather boots. His skin was pale and his gold eyes were all too reminiscent of his twin brother aboard the Enterprise. But there, as Beverly Crusher knew far too well from past experience, all similarity ceased.

"Lore!" she breathed, hardly daring to say the name out loud.

All the android did was to give her an insincere and somewhat scornful smile. "Dr Crusher, welcome to my humble realm."

TWO

Turbolifts are strange things, mused Deanna Troi, for on a normal journey there was the potential for meeting a more diverse cross section of crew than if you sat for a week in Ten Forward. The lift doors opened as another request stop was reached, and Geordi La Forge stepped inside.

"Deanna. How's it going?" La Forge's easy charm amongst those people he was familiar with never failed to raise a smile from Deanna, even at times such as these.

"I am fine, Geordi. It's nice to see you back safely from Batta V... and busy? I hear the landing of the colonists onto the Starbase has been delayed."

"I should say. The new Starbase's transporter system hasn't got the capacity for 700 personnel yet, and the Enterprise's transporter units decided to go on vacation. I suppose it serves us right for winding the power up as we did, and we did push them to the limit with sky high boosting factors... Sorry, Counselor, I didn't mean to go on."

"You're not. And thank you for volunteering to return with the Captain... and going down to the surface with Data, Geordi." *I am trying to say thank you for going back for my friend without embarrassing him*, realized Deanna.

"No problem." The Chief Engineer was silent for a moment, the only sound evident being the lift drives, before he continued, "Although it seems to have caused more problems and raised more questions than it solved."

"True. Speculation and gossip about Dr Crusher's disappearance is rife, and morale among the bridge crew is very - and I mean *very* - low. Failed missions can have a very negative effect - particularly when there is so much at stake."

Why am I telling him all this? thought Deanna to herself. *Is it because I sense... yes, unease, anxiety about something... or someone?*

"I agree, Counselor. I must confess that I've buried myself in Engineering since the rendezvous with the saucer section. Between the general demeanour of Captain Picard and Commander Riker, Worf's Klingon guilt complex and Data..."

"Data?" Deanna cocked her head to one side in inquiry. "That's unusual. Is he not, perhaps, mimicking Commander Riker, who has been very disturbed by recent events... or maybe the Captain?"

"I don't know, Counselor. All I do know is that he is quiet, withdrawn, uncommunicative and very preoccupied. It's not like the Data I know"

"It doesn't sound like the Data I know either. Do you know where he is?"

"In his quarters, I guess. He excused himself from bridge duty on entering orbit at Starbase 775, and I haven't seen him since. As I said, Counselor, not like Data."

"Are you busy, Mr La Forge - right at this moment?"

"Nothing that Barclay can't take care of, Counselor. Deck 8?" Deanna nodded and he instructed the turbolift. The lift gently stopped and then changed course to the revised destination. Deanna could sense relief coming from Commander La Forge - it would appear that Data's preoccupation and withdrawn behaviour had worried his friend far more than he liked to let on. La Forge and Data had been firm friends from the first, they had worked on the bridge together at the Conn and Ops prior to La Forge's promotion, and had contributed towards numerous Away Teams. There was the additional factor of La Forge being to Data what Dr Crusher was to the Human crew element - if anyone was qualified to pass judgement on the Lt. Commander's general demeanour, it was Geordi.

As they walked to Lt. Commander Data's quarters, the sound of violin music could be heard coming from within, not unusual as Data's prowess with the violin was becoming well known. What was not so usual was the odd badly struck note in the otherwise perfect melody.

"That - " La Forge punctuated the statement by punching the air with his index finger - "shows he is not concentrating. His mind is on something else."

Counselor Troi waited for Geordi to hail Data using the door comm, and then both of them walked into his quarters.

Troi found Data's living area a constantly changing source of fascination, as the android officer would add pieces to his own domain that he felt would aid him in his quest to realise the Human condition. It was a rare occurrence indeed, for her to visit and not find some additional piece of furniture, artifact or acquisition that piqued her interest. One of the less inanimate objects was weaving its way around her legs at this moment: Data's cat, Spot, pursuing its own endless quest for more cat food.

Data was in the act of replacing his violin into its case, his slow care and precision typical of the way he tackled any number of tasks. Troi walked in and sat next to La Forge on

one of the low seats in the living area, racking her brains on how to tackle Data about his change in behaviour without making him feel he was being interrogated. At least with most humanoid or organic based life, Deanna was able to get very useful clues from her subject via her empathic powers - but with Data she drew a blank. This made the android officer very much of a challenge, for although he denied the capacity for emotion and was certainly not 'readable' in the Betazoid sense, he was the one most often in need of genuine help and guidance as he negotiated the everyday minefields of life aboard a starship manned predominantly by emotional Humans.

Fortunately for Deanna, however, Geordi La Forge had no qualms in approaching Data's problematic behaviour in much the same manner as he would should the Enterprise's engineering systems display behaviour that concerned him.

"OK, come on Data," said La Forge, heartily. "What's up?"

"What's up, Geordi?" Data looked puzzled, as if thrown by the terminology, but his friend was not duped for a second.

"Oh no you don't, Data. Only last week you nailed that particular phrase, yet again, down to its last nuance," cautioned Geordi. "You just try and change the subject by pleading ignorance to the way I asked my question, and I'll just ask it again, in machine code if need be!"

"Ah," replied Data, sitting also. Then he stood again. "Perhaps you would like a drink?"

"No, thank you."

"Something to eat? Maybe you would like something to read?"

"No, Data," La Forge and Troi chorused in unison. Troi found it hard to suppress a smile at Data's almost comical look of hurt feelings, but the gravity of a situation that would make her usually most forthcoming colleague obviously try and avoid the pending discussion made her impulsively reach out and catch his hand as he stood.

"Data," she said quietly. "Come and sit down."

Only when he did so, his expression startled, did she continue. "Geordi and I are here because we are worried about you. Your behaviour has been rather... atypical, of late."

"Atypical?" Data tilted his head in the way that made a question imminent. "How so?"

"You have been withdrawn, preoccupied... You have excused yourself from bridge duty," La Forge answered. "There have been no jokes, no social gaffes, no poker games... in short, no behaviour that I would expect from you, my friend."

"That would imply that although my jokes are judged terrible, they are, in fact, no less welcome." Data digested this snippet of information with some relish. "Interesting."

"Now that's more like Mr Data," Geordi smiled

"So, Data, do you want to tell us what has been troubling you? You don't have to," Deanna quickly added, not wishing to be too intrusive, "but you may find it helps."

Data sat quite still for a few moments, unblinking, immobile, until Deanna threw a nervous glance at Geordi - which appeared to shake Data from his reverie.

"I have a problem. It will, of course, eventually be open to discussion, but as the Captain has not called the Batta V debriefing session until after the colonists have disembarked - I have been taking this opportunity to try and clarify my findings concerning the remnant of med coat found on Batta V by you, Geordi."

"Go on," said Geordi, leaning forward in his seat, his elbows resting on his thighs, one hand propping up his chin.

"It was most fortunate that you found it, Geordi."

Geordi gave a short, uncertain laugh. "It would have been much more fortunate if the med coat had been in one piece and with Dr Crusher still inside it."

"Possibly not. The levels of radiation evident on the surface of the Batta V colony, and the fact that Dr Crusher would have been exposed to these levels for at least the time it took us to return to the colony in the stardrive section, probably means she would have suffered the effects of irreversible radiation exposure."

"So you think that there is a chance that Beverly Crusher is still alive, Data?" Troi enunciated her words clearly, in case she had misunderstood him.

Data appeared to ignore the Counselor's question, or - less likely - did not hear it. He stood and moved to pick up the piece of cloth still sealed in its small sample bag.

"When I first studied this piece of fabric, I was intrigued by the manner in which it had been parted from the main body of the med coat. If it had been the force of the blast, the effects of which we saw to be a sizeable one, Geordi, then the fabric should have been torn in the weakest direction of the cloth. It was torn in the direction of the bias - potentially the direction requiring most force to overcome the stretch in the material."

"Go on, Data," Geordi's face looked intent behind his VISOR, his mouth set in a stern line.

"Why was it torn, Data? Why not cut or burned by a phaser blast?" Deanna queried.

"I do not know, Counselor. Possibly for want of the correct tools, or possibly for speed. Assuming that something or someone had effected the removal of Dr Crusher..."

"Possibly the same someone or something who removed the larger items in the facility after the blast," added Geordi, "and, potentially, left the replicator casing and the Vulcan hull panel."

"Indeed, Geordi. Assuming that something or someone had effected the removal of Dr Crusher, I decided to analyse the cloth for organic debris - skin cells, fibres..."

"And what did you find, Data?" Deanna cut through the android's tendency to be somewhat loquacious when replying to a question, realising that he was building up to a very important revelation. Data blinked at her interruption, but quickly adapted to her inferred request to get to the point.

"An interesting mixture of skin fragments, amino acids and inorganic material, approximately a third of which I have conclusively proved to be Dr Crusher's through genetic matching with the ship's records."

"And the other two thirds, Data? The kind of force required to tear that fabric in such an odd direction must have left you all kinds of evidence embedded in the fabric's fibres," Geordi observed. "What kind of cellular material did you find?"

"The truly cellular material belonged only to Dr Crusher," Data replied. "The remainder was a mixture of compounds that appeared to be mainly of a polymeric origin."

"Such as?" Geordi's analytical faculties were by now working overtime.

"On the evidence available, positive identification is virtually impossible."

"Then extrapolate, Data." Geordi leaped to his feet. "Theorise. Hell, *guess*, even. What or where could it have come from?"

Data looked at Deanna and Geordi in a way that indicated to the Counselor that they were finally getting to the source of Data's concern.

"Positive identification of origin is impossible," Data maintained. "However, I have carried out extensive further tests that indicate there is a good chance that the debris was derived from tripolymer composites of some form. In addition to this, there was anomalous biological material that it took me some time to positively identify as bioplast sheeting."

Geordi looked at his friend, suddenly very still.

"Tripolymer composites AND bioplast sheeting remnants?"

"Yes."

Deanna did not understand the relevance of these two compounds, but she did understand the sudden surge of agitation she sensed coming from Geordi.

"What? Explain to me. I don't understand," she asked quickly.

"Some form of moving equipment?" Geordi proposed.

"Covered in bioplast sheeting, which by its very nature is quite fragile," Data answered. "Improbable."

"OK then. An implanted limb?"

"Unlikely. Implants are usually only capable of normal limb strength due to physical frame limitations."

"An implanted limb of alien origin?"

"Using materials developed within the Federation - even more unlikely."

Geordi paused momentarily. "Whilst studying it, you contaminated it?"

"Impossible. Only you handled it, and then with extreme care, Geordi, before it was placed in sterile conditions. I found no trace of your genetic material on the sample."

"You are not making this very easy, Data," Geordi said finally.

"Partly because I have posed all these questions to myself, and more," replied Data, "and have found only one answer I consider acceptable. As Holmes would say, when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth. At the moment I am running one last test, that should prove almost conclusively if I am right."

"Data! Geordi!" Troi, by now, was also on her feet. "Would you mind telling me exactly what is going on? What is this 'last test'?"

"If I am not mistaken Counselor, Data is looking for a 'match' to the debris on the med coat."

"With what? From where?" Troi questioned.

"From myself, Counselor," Data replied in the quiet, gentle voice that seemed oddly at variance with the highly charged atmosphere being generated by the other two people in the room. "Furthermore, in retrospect, only I possess the strength and the dexterity to rend the fabric identically to the way exhibited by our sample, in a similar confined space to that seen in the storage facility."

"The more I hear, Data, the less I like," Geordi broke in, "and the more likely it seems that the last test is going to give a big positive."

"But Data," Deanna interceded, puzzled, "you were with us, here, aboard the Enterprise, bound for Starbase 775. With all due respect, you cannot be in two places at once... however unique and remarkable you are!"

"Right, Counselor. Which leaves us one potential candidate out of a whole galaxy of possibilities that could have been at the scene."

Geordi nodded as he folded his arms across his chest. "Data's brother Lore."

Lore leant against one of the largest crates in the hold, his arms crossed, his head cocked to one side and his whole attitude relaxed as he regarded Beverly Crusher.

"What? Not pleased to see me, Dr Crusher?" His sardonic inflection was marked. Beverly felt her knees starting to buckle from shock and exhaustion, but she managed to sit with some dignity upon an upturned cargo drum, her head tautly unbowed.

"No fond greeting for the poor soul that your wretched son and my cursed brother consigned to two years floating in deep space?"

"Why am I here?" Beverly requested wearily.

"Later, Doctor, later. Are you not interested in what happened to me after your son, my inestimable brother and yourself managed to cheat the Crystal Entity of the Enterprise?"

Beverly looked at him as dispassionately as she could manage, although all her mind could recall was the horrifying burning sensation of a phaser set at level 5, the smell of charred cloth and her scorched skin.

"Oh, charming." Lore smiled in almost genuine amusement. "I see you have not forgotten my little parting gift from our last meeting."

"The radiation burns took some time to go," Beverly snapped, seized by an urge to rub her right arm, an urge which she resisted grimly.

"Oh, poor Doctor. Did I hurt your arm? Did I put you through a little inconvenience? Trust me - it was not even measurable on the same scale as the inconvenience you put me through, Doctor!" He spat her title out as if it was a bad taste in his mouth. Beverly watched him warily as he stood erect, hooking his hands into the thick leather belt about his slim waist, looking uncannily like Data about to launch into an acting scene.

"Let me tell you about inconvenience, Doctor. After I was transported out into space by your devil's spawn, I drifted for two years. Two years! Have you any concept of how boring deep space is in the rawest sense? Take it from me, it is very, very boring. And then I got lucky." He snorted with disgusted amusement which suggested to Beverly that Lore had not counted his luck to be necessarily of the good kind. "I was plucked from that boring void by a Packled trade ship."

He paused and fixed Dr Crusher with a look of mock enquiry. "Have you ever had the pleasure of being aboard a Packled trade ship? No? A little outside your sphere, eh, Dr Beverly Crusher? Well, take it from me, benign they may be, but bright they ain't. Conversation? Arts? Literature? Forget it, they make empty space look good, but luckily for me they tend to equate strength with intelligence - so they decided I was a veritable genius by the time I finished with them, and left them whining on the Arkos asteroid cluster. I did find their prime motivation of instant knowledge, instant power and instant gratification an intriguing one however."

He moved until he was standing directly in front of Beverly Crusher. "But they were still stupid."

"Greed can make people careless," was all Beverly could manage.

Lore looked at her, his pale android face expressionless, his gold eyes opaque. "As many things can, Doctor." He suddenly broke into a wolfish grin. "Like compassion, maybe. Like duty? Like any one of those prime motivating forces that left you stranded on Batta V colony."

"I remember a bang... and a blast... I think." Beverly creased her brow, suddenly realising she had not actually, as yet, recalled the events immediately prior to waking aboard this ship. Mild amnesia? Concussion? She got up from her seat and crossed to where her tricorder lay atop a low square crate,

"Slight concussion... otherwise OK." She waved the medical scanner over her head and checked the tricorder reading, glad of the excuse to move away from Lore without appearing nervous of him.

"Spare me, Doctor," Lore replied impatiently. "Do you think I am really interested?"

"So what were you doing on Batta V, and what caused the blast?" Beverly put the scanner and tricorder down and turned to lean against the crate, deliberately trying to appear calm and poised.

"Scavenging. In the true Packled tradition, I was looking for things to make me go. Unfortunately a rather large container of highly unstable trioxydetane III went, before I had a chance to set up a remote containment field around it. But I managed to get some other useful bits and pieces."

"So you caused the blast while you were stealing from the storage facility?" the Doctor observed caustically

"I was not stealing - all that equipment would have still been sitting there with the sun growing ever more unstable, just getting more radioactive with the rest of the colony remains. If I had not got there first, the Ferengi would have - not all of us are wrapped up in that oh so noble world of Starfleet, Doctor. And I do so hate waste."

"So that makes hovering around the known galaxy like a flock of intergalactic vultures all right, does it?" Beverly's condemnation was clear to hear, her tone sarcastically cutting. "It's your turn to spare me now, Lore!"

"Oh, I am not seeking your approbation, Doctor. In fact I want nothing from you at all."

"Then WHY am I here?" Beverly Crusher repeated through gritted teeth.

"Have you ever heard the Klingon saying, 'Revenge is a dish best served cold', Doctor?" Lore lounged back, his face aloof and impassive. "There I was doing my block beaming, and then there you were. Call it what you will; Fate, Kismet, Destiny, Preordained - my luck, your misfortune. One of the few people in this universe, the consideration of whose final reckoning kept me amused during my two years adrift in deep space. I spent two years plotting, scheming my revenge on you all. What a gift, what an opportunity... what horizons of revenge are open to me now, Dr Beverly Crusher!"

Beverly fought the rising sensation of nausea in her throat, and replied as calmly and as practically as she could, "The Enterprise will return to search for me. They will not give up until they find me, Lore. Reconsider now. Return me to my ship."

"Oh, Doctor, you disappoint me. Are you instructing me to return you to your friends? Or maybe you are commanding me?"

"I am asking you - please return me to the Enterprise." Beverly Crusher was maintaining her control by sheer will power, her jaw tense, her whole body rigid.

"Asking me?" He threw her an insolent look. "You could try begging me."

"Is that what I have to do, Lore? Do I have to get down on my knees and beg? What kind of perverse creature are you that you get pleasure from humiliating a captive?"

"Oh, just your run of the mill sentient - with a grudge cultivated over a couple of years, Doctor," Lore answered pleasantly, "and you could at least sound a little more apologetic for what you put me through."

"Apologetic? I am not sorry! One thing I have no regrets about whatsoever is saving the Enterprise from the Crystal Entity. That 'thing' would have devoured us all, as it did life on Omicron Theta." She took a deep breath, adding, "And you can kill me here and now, Lore, but know this, I would do it all, all of it, over again. No regrets."

Lore burst into delighted laughter and applauded loudly. "Oh, nobly said, dear Doctor... but please bear in mind that I have the capacity to make the activities of the Crystal Entity look like a picnic if I should put my mind to it."

Beverly could not find it in herself to doubt him.

"And Dr Crusher - I do so hate meddlers... particularly ones who get in my way. Someone such as yourself needs a little time and trouble taken over their demise, don't you think?"

His almost manic laughter echoed around the hold, even after the hold doors had slammed shut behind him.

"Merde. Ou se trouvent tu, maintenant, Jean-Luc Picard," Beverly shivered to herself under her breath.

Troi sat at her post on the bridge, to the left of Captain Jean Luc Picard and opposite William T Riker, who was sitting on the Captain's right. Neither of the two men spoke a word, but Troi could feel her empathic senses being almost buffeted by the frustration and anxiety of inaction from the two men beside her. That they hid it so well was something she could merely marvel at, and if she ignored her empathic powers, the two appeared as every other person on the bridge perceived them - the coolest of professional partnerships.

Lt Commander Data's revelations concerning Dr Crusher's potential abductor had been discussed at a bridge crew meeting prior to departure from Starbase 775, and had aroused a great deal of concern, mixed with relief and dismay. That Lore had been responsible for the deaths of the 411 colonists on Omicron Theta through his association with the Crystal Entity was not open to dispute. Neither was the fact that it had been Lore who had dealt almost certainly fatal injuries to his own, and Data's, creator, Dr Noonian Soong, not two years after he had attempted to deliver the Enterprise into the Crystal Entity's power. Deanna had noted Data's unusual reluctance to contribute to the proceedings after he had dropped the bombshell of his forensic work results onto the meeting. On returning to his position at Ops on the bridge, the android was still strangely silent. Counselor Troi's professional antennae twitched; her opportunity, however, came sooner than she expected.

"La Forge to bridge. Captain, can I borrow Commander Data for a while - we have found some interesting results regarding the ionized dust that was interfering with the Enterprise's shields at Batta V. I sure could use his input."

"Mr Data."

"I am on my way, sir." As he spoke, the android had extricated himself from Ops and was striding towards the turbolift. Nimble, Counselor Troi skipped from her chair and moved after him, aiming to reach the turbolift doors the same time as the android bridge officer.

"Data." Troi slipped into the turbolift and rested back against its side, her palms flat against its panels, providing a cushion for her back. Taking this opportunity to study Data at close quarters, she was not surprised to see he looked no different from his normal self.

"Counselor." Data acknowledged her presence in his quiet formal tone.

"You know, Data, you are not responsible for your brother's behaviour, if it is indeed your brother who is involved in this."

It was her best card in a poor deck, as Deanna knew that Data's reaction to any number of circumstances was often hard to predict from a Human perspective.

"I know that, Counselor," replied Data, before adding, "and I am 89.7% convinced that it

is Lore's doing."

"Good."

There was a silence, then Data blinked and inclined his head which clearly meant some elaboration or expansion was on its way.

"However, I cannot help but think of what I could have done in the past to prevent his behaviour thus far; I could have had Wesley beam him into deep space with a random pattern, and so destroyed him upon discovering his intended betrayal of the Enterprise to the Crystal Entity; I could have - "

"But Data - " Deanna sought to reassure - "he was - is - your brother."

"Not everyone has a brother who makes them wish they were an only child," Data replied almost mournfully.

"You DO feel responsible," Deanna realised as the turbo lift came to a stop at the Engineering level before shifting direction.

"It was at my insistence that Lore was reassembled, Counselor. Because Lore convinced me of his sincerity, it made him able to deactivate me - thus Dr Crusher and Wesley became involved. Because Dr Crusher aided me in exposing Lore's plot, she will appear to him as a fair target for revenge. I feel that this crisis appears to have matured out of a series of bad personal judgements on my part."

"Data, would Lore have been reassembled if Captain Picard, or Commander Riker, or Worf... or even if I had objected to it?"

"No, but - "

"Did Dr Crusher, in fact, not only agree to Lore being reassembled, but actually do a major part of the work on the project?"

"Yes."

"Then Dr Crusher has only herself to blame."

Data was silent for a few moments, digesting Counselor Troi's argument.

"Data, Lore is as much his own person as you or I. You cannot blame yourself for his actions, or go over the past examining how you could have predicted the future any more than he could. We all get things wrong - even your creator, Dr Soong, had to have two attempts to get it right. So forget the recriminations, and concentrate some of that energy on getting Dr Crusher home."

Data studied the Counselor in silence for some moments, and then gave a brief nod of agreement as finally the turbolift doors opened at their destination.

Troi patted his arm as he went to step out of the turbo-lift. "And Data, you are not your brother's keeper. I have heard Beverly Crusher often say that there are times when it is more than enough trouble looking after number one in this Universe!"

"Really, Counselor?" The acutely puzzled look upon Data's face should have been

enough to warn Troi. "But Commander Riker has always appeared supremely capable of looking after himself. I would quote by way of example, the occasion involving - "

Troi rested her head against the side of the turbolift, and groaned.

It was dark, so dark Beverly could hear voices whispering in the dark, lisping, muttering low enough so that she could not quite catch the content of the conversation. She craned her ears trying to hear what they were saying, but all she succeeded in identifying was that one belonged to her Grandmother. Her Grandmother always seemed to spend her time closeted in secret corners since they came to Ovada III. Ovada III!

Beverly Crusher woke with a start, still to darkness, but this time the silence was complete.

"I must have dozed off," she said to the silence, the sound of her voice reassuring against the background hum of the ship. What on earth had triggered memories of her childhood on Ovada III?

The stress. This is enough to make anyone have nightmares, she told herself sternly. Stiffly she clambered to her feet and moved over to her alien patient; reluctantly she scanned it with her tricorder, knowing with professional foreboding exactly what she would see. She had healed the alien's damaged areas and had sterilized the tissue surrounding the laceration the best she could with the equipment available, but after a period of temporary stabilisation, the alien's life signs started sliding inexorably down, if anything even faster than before.

"Damn, this is so frustrating. If only I knew more about your damn physiology!" She cursed roundly, finding some release in throwing down a used swab. Crusher ran her fingers through her hair and closed her eyes tight in tense, controlled fury. For a woman completely in control of her own destiny under normal circumstances, her present situation was growing more intolerable by the moment.

"Lore!" She looked up and shouted into the darkness. "I know you are listening, damn you. Answer me!"

Nothing.

"Answer me, damn you!"

"You called, Doctor?" The familiar drawling voice was somewhat distorted by the door intercom. The Doctor marched over to the door itself.

"Lore, you must return me to the Enterprise. I have done as much as I can for the alien here, but it is dying. I need my library, my med equipment, exobiology records... Dammit, I need to get back to my ship - urgently!"

There was another extended silence.

"Lore, did you hear me? I said this alien is dying. I need to get it back to the Enterprise if I am to do anything. Please."

Silence again, and then the laconic drawl came back. "Nice try, Doctor, but no."

Beverly Crusher stared at the door comm as if it had suddenly grown arms and legs.

"Lore, the alien is dying. Dying. I can help it. I beg of you..."

"Begging now, Doctor, will do you no good whatsoever. The answer is still no!"

Beverly Crusher closed her eyes and counted to ten, then twenty, and then thirty but even after a count of forty, the invective she hurled at the door would have made even Worf blush.

"Doctor! Doctor, language, please. There is a dying alien present after all."

"Do NOT mock me, Lore. Do not mock the end of something you are just the crudest, cruellest parody of. I wonder if Dr Noonian Soong truly realised the barbarity that arose out of his genius when he created you? I wonder if it would be more appropriate to refer to him as Dr Frankenstein? So what does that make you? But even Dr Soong realized his mistake and disassembled you. What curse did we seek to unleash on the universe when we made the mistake of giving you a second chance, Lore? Was the man who said 'A mere copier of nature can never produce anything great' right?"

Crusher was in full flow, her Titian temper unleashed. "And furthermore, I defy you to do your worst. You can try and hurt me, but you cannot touch the essence that is me, because it is something you cannot even recognize. I pity you. 'Show me your friends and I will show you what you are'. What does that make you, Lore, for on that basis you are nothing but a big fat zero!"

As she paused, her chest heaving, waiting for a response, there was nothing. The silence closed in around her once more and she released a shuddering sigh. Beverly felt triumph and elation, for in that one moment she had defied him and survived - but for how long?

Her answer was almost immediate, for the ominous chill in the air indicated a severe drop in temperature within the hold. Beverly Crusher instantly made for her tricorder, recalibrated its settings, and took a reading,

"Two degrees C in as many minutes," she observed with growing horror. "The bastard has turned off life support. Oh, well done, Dr Crusher, open your BIG mouth why don't you!"

God, I am STUPID, she berated herself. When I should have been buying time to get myself out of here, I spend it, instead, arguing with a jumped up tricorder on legs! "Sorry, Data," she apologised under her breath.

Dr Crusher took a reading from her patient, and was relieved to find that at least its life signs seemed unaffected by the temperature drop. They were down on the last reading, but not outside the established trend. The hold was, by now, getting noticeably colder and Beverly started foraging around the crates to find something to wrap about her in order to keep warm. She managed to find a reasonable amount of enviro-wrap swathed around a small crate towards the back of the hold. It did not smell too peachy, but the drop towards true space temperature made this factor the least of Dr Beverly Crusher's concerns. Cocooning herself up within its folds, she lay down against a crate, near the alien's warmth and her med bag.

"I must conserve energy," she told herself numbly, but already she was starting to shiver, all skin not covered by the enviro-wrap feeling distinctly chilled. As she lay there, staring at the stars flickering past, she realised the drop in temperature also heralded the end to air purification. The air she was now breathing had a distinctly stale factor about it, even though

it was now a full 15 degrees C cooler than it had been not 30 minutes ago.

So this is it, Beverly thought to herself as she pulled the enviro-wrap tighter about her. *This is the end*. But never had she imagined it to come like this; her closest brushes with death had always happened, most recently, on duty with the Away Team. *Like Tasha*, came the painful thought, except Tasha Yar's had not been a close brush but the real thing. Beverly turned to look at the stars outside the makeshift hold; they always had the power to make her feel so small and insignificant when she looked at them like this. Microscopic, when she reminded herself that each one was a potential sun with any number of Class M planets, possibly sustaining life, orbiting them. She hugged her arms tighter about her in order to try and generate a little more warmth, and Beverly recalled the words her Grandmother had spoken in the very darkest days of the tragedy on Ovada III, when and where, for many, death had come as a welcome release from an increasingly unbearable existence.

"Remember, child, if you ever do escape this grim net of fate that has been cast over this world - everything you do, everything you appreciate, everything you achieve, however small and insignificant, counts. Every extra day you are, is perhaps much more than was meant to be. Every hour, every minute, each second, should be seized and used to its fullest - but by the same token, do not be afraid to let it all go when the time finally comes."

Beverly shut her eyes, closing out the stars' cruel brilliance, suddenly ice cold to her core.

Has my time come? She felt the question pop unbidden into her mind and bubble onto her lips - but her whole face was too cold to articulate the words. But as her outer faculties grew weaker, her mind seemed to run faster and faster with more images and memories than she could have thought possible.

The fading memories of Jack Crusher and the button bright ones of Wesley, her wonder child, boy genius, his achievements beyond her wildest hopes and fears. Her time with Jack had been cruelly cut short by the highest price Starfleet could ever expect an officer to pay - but Wesley had filled that space, and more, in her life. Beverly had had to fight really hard for her original assignment to the USS Enterprise. It was hard because it was the prestigious flagship of Starfleet, and so all Doctors within that organization worth their salt aspired to be its Chief Medical Officer. But Dr Beverly Crusher had wanted the commission so badly for a completely different set of more personal reasons, among which was the fact that the commanding officer was to be Jean-Luc Picard.

Many of her friends and colleagues had been surprised, and some almost shocked, by her decision to fight so actively for an assignment that would put her under the command of the man who many held responsible for Jack Crusher's death. But Beverly had not been deterred, for she was an astute woman. She had realised, early on, that for well rounded emotional development, Wesley would need good male role models, and she knew enough of Picard's integrity to know that she could do a lot worse than place Wes at the outer reaches of such a man's orbit. Jack Crusher had always considered Jean-Luc Picard an exceptional man, who was known to draw to him exceptional staff - thus a posting to the Enterprise, for all the associated effort, seemed an excellent choice and well worth the struggle. It had paid off. Surrounded by influences such as William Riker, Geordi La Forge and Picard himself, Wesley had matured into a fine, well-balanced individual. But the further advantages of diversity of life aboard the Enterprise, the presence of Deanna Troi, Data and Worf, had added a maturity and tolerance of other peoples' ways far beyond his years.

The coldness of the hold diverted her momentarily, freezing now, as it was exposed to space temperatures. She looked across at her med bag - should she have sedated herself? It seemed far too far to stretch to get hold of the bag, and too much effort to load and use a hypo.

Beverly looked over at 'her' alien, the tricorder lying on the floor next to it flicking clearly visible readings at regular intervals. It was displaying about the same amount of life signs as before.

Unlike me, thought Beverly. She shifted weakly inside the piece of enviro-wrap. The air smelt more than stale now, and slowly but surely she felt consciousness finally starting to slip away from her frozen form.

Picard sat at the head of the long conference table, his chin held thoughtfully in his hand as he waited patiently for order to come to the assembled meeting. On his right, as ever, sat Riker in conversation with Deanna Troi, who was sitting opposite the Commander. Next to her sat Data, and next to him, Geordi La Forge, opposite Worf, both of them deep in contemplation of some read-outs, watched closely by the Klingon Security Chief. With a start, Picard realised that each of them had taken their usual seats, and as a result, one in the middle had been left empty.

"Ahem." Picard called for their attention. "Before we start, could we... move a little more evenly about the table?"

With a growl so low Picard could pretend not to have heard it, Worf moved into the seat next to Will Riker.

"Thank you, Mr Worf." Picard gave him his best Captain's smile before asking for status reports.

"We have moved into a suitable position to carry out long range scans around the Batta V solar system, whilst minimising the effect of the Batta V sun's activity on the ship's sensors. However," continued Worf in an unhappy voice, "there are still anomalies resulting from our proximity to Batta V that are making our readings less than accurate."

"The Enterprise has commenced scanning for any ships of any description," Commander Riker continued, "but we have reason to believe that Lore's ship may have been in orbit around Batta V at the same time as the Enterprise, but was undetectable due being cloaked."

"Cloaked, Number One?" A frown creased Picard's brow. "How so?"

"During my last brief encounter with Lore, he mentioned he had been rescued by a Packled trade ship, sir." Data answered the open question. "The Packleds are a very acquisitive race. When we last encountered a Packled ship, their equipment did include Klingon and Romulan, which therefore indicates at least two technologies which have a cloaking capability at their disposal."

"The Packleds have a very eclectic taste in equipment which they acquire extensively from other cultures," Commander Riker put in dourly.

"Understood, Commander," Picard acknowledged.

"What really concerns me, Captain, is that the Packleds lacked the intuition and resourcefulness to make anything more of the technology they had, than what they had been 'given' by those unfortunate enough to have been persuaded to part with it. Lore - if he has even half the ability of our Commander Data - is a completely different matter."

"Indeed," the Captain agreed, his face tense as he mulled over what his crew had told him. He gave a deep sigh, and then looked up to address his colleagues. "A cloaking device, assuming it is constantly engaged, is going to make tracking this ship virtually impossible," he observed quietly. "Disregarding the fact that the ship may also have high warp capability, such a cloaking device will render any attempt on our part to search for it ineffective, to say the least."

"Not necessarily," Geordi La Forge said from half way down the length of the table, "in this case at least."

"Mr La Forge, explain." Picard's attention was suddenly focussed on his brilliant Chief Engineer. If anyone was capable of tracking the untrackable by technological sleight of hand, it was this man.

"Whilst looking at the problems of dealing with the Batta V ionized solar dust, we came across some rather interesting properties. One of these is the release of some form of resonance that distorts light in the visible spectrum."

"Hence the strange atmospheric colours seen on Batta V," observed Worf.

"Exactly," La Forge agreed. "The phenomena appears to be a manifestation of a form of Van Allen belt, with this solar 'dust' trapped high above Batta V by the colony planet's magnetic field. It also accounts for the odd appearance of light through the shields at the time of orbit."

"But surely once clear, in the vacuum of space, the particles would be scattered instantaneously. I am assuming here that you are about to say if the Enterprise was frosted in this ionized dust, then Lore's ship must have been also?" Riker queried.

"Well, they would have been if the cloaking device had been dropped. But as the device itself is, by my guess, probably some form of activated field, the ionized particles remain trapped. The substance hidden, but their resonant effect unhideable."

"This does all appear to hinge somewhat on the premise that Lore will not have dropped his shields, or disengaged his cloaking device, or indeed both," Picard commented astutely, "since leaving Batta V."

"Sir." Data's quiet voice rang out in the tense silence of the conference room. "If my brother has indeed abducted the Doctor, he will assume that the Enterprise will be in pursuit. In which case it is highly unlikely that he would disengage either device."

"How do we know that this is not some kind of trap, Captain?" Worf cut in. "Is it not possible that Lore is using Dr Crusher as bait? Maybe he is once more in league with the Crystal Entity, and is seeking to draw us into its lair?"

"We do not know," the Captain conceded, "but the use of the cloaking device suggests that it is not whilst in transit to... wherever... that Lore wants to be caught - so I suggest that we use every means at our disposal to do just that."

"Sensors will have to be radically recalibrated Captain," La Forge pointed out.

"And it may be worth launching a similarly recalibrated probe, so that we can cover a wider search area," Data added.

"Make it so," Captain Picard answered curtly. La Forge, Data and Worf took this as the signal that they could now quit the meeting, and speedily exited the conference room in the direction of Engineering.

Troi, Riker and Picard remained seated about the shiny, ebonite table - their faces impassive.

"Captain, what odds do you truly give on our Chief Medical Officer still being alive?" Riker asked, his face stern.

Picard looked at him, before drawing in a deep breath and releasing it as a long sigh. "Lore was involved in the death of 411 colonists on Omicron Theta, and was prepared to kill a 1000 strong crew, my crew, aboard my ship," he answered with deliberation. "Only three people stood between him and the achievement of that goal. Dr Beverly Crusher was one of them. What odds would you give, Number One?"

"If that is so, Captain, then Beverly Crusher could already be dead. I would be neglecting my duty, sir, if I did not point out that we could be severely jeopardising the crew, and the Enterprise, for no good reason." Riker leaned forward over the table, his face earnest.

"There are also odds, Number One, that the Doctor may well be still alive, most particularly if she is to be used as a lure or bait, as Mr Worf seems to think, in a trap. And, however small those odds may be, that is more than good enough reason for me," Picard replied coolly, his manner aloof, precluding explanation.

"I was hoping you would say that, sir," smiled Riker.

THREE

It was the coughing that awoke her, for it felt as if someone was trying to drown her with a glass of water, and by the time she was sufficiently awake to initiate a cough response, it felt as if most of the water was already in her lungs.

I am going to choke... I'm choking to death, or I would be if I wasn't dead already, Beverly told herself as she continued to hack with such intensity that she could not even force open her eyes, which were streaming tears.

Without warning or notice, she was flipped up, and her head pushed over her knees, her back thumped hard, twice. Beverly blinked through tear filled eyes, her mouth open like a goldfish.

"Speak roughly to your little boy,
Beat him when he sneezes,
He only does it to annoy...
Because he knows it teases," said that all too familiar voice.

"Oh my... " Beverly looked into the mildly interested face of Lore as she gasped for breath. "And I was coughing, NOT sneezing - there is a difference," she managed.

"You're the Doctor!"

"I hardly expected the afterlife to contain you. A purgatory containing a you quoting Alice in Wonderland... What did I do that was SO bad?" Beverly observed sourly, still

wheezing and briefly coughing again, to check her throat was clear.

"Ah," said Lore, his face showing almost genuine amusement. Beverly found it hard not to stare - it was very strange seeing such an expression on what appeared, to all intents and purposes, to be Data's face.

"The good news, Dr Crusher, is that - "

"This is all just a terrible dream, and I am about to wake up."

"You are not dead."

"I am still here?"

"Obviously."

"What is so good about that?" Beverly muttered, starting to look around and extricate herself from the enviro-wrap, realising that Lore's hands were still on her shoulders. "And get your hands off me, you murderer!"

"But you're not dead!" Lore responded hotly, his tone one of responding as if to a great injustice.

"Not for want of trying," Beverly replied furiously, "on your part anyway, you murderer. Get out of my way!"

She pulled herself onto her feet and moved stiffly over to where the alien was lying, the tricorder still tracing and monitoring the creature's life signs and metabolic output.

"It's still alive," Lore told her.

"No thanks to you."

"Well, don't thank me then," Lore replied hotly. "See if I care!"

"Get me back to my ship," Crusher responded. "I'm sick to death of this ridiculous game."

"I cannot. At present." Lore looked away, his face impassive.

"I shouldn't be believing that either," Beverly said sharply. "What's wrong with the ship?"

"Nothing that can't be fixed," was Lore's answer as he made for the exit, "given a little time."

"And THEN you will return me to the Enterprise?" Beverly called out expectantly.

There was no answer, save the closing of the hold doors after him. Beverly released her breath. She had not realised she had been holding it until that moment. She returned to her tricorder readout, but the data as it flashed up told the same depressing story as prior to the 'accident' with the life support systems.

"Well, I have learned one thing," Crusher informed the prone being. "Your decline is

probably NOT due to the fact that the temperature or atmosphere is not quite right aboard this vessel. But what it *is* due to... I just don't know." She released a long sigh, before adding, "And it is probably just too late now anyhow."

"Probe ready for launch, Captain," Worf reported, his deep voice vibrating about the bridge. "Ready to release on your mark."

"Co-ordinates, Ensign?" Picard stood, straightening his uniform top with a twitch as he walked forward of the Ops position.

"361.000, mark 2, sir," the Ensign at Conn informed him.

"Then on my mark. Ready, fire probe."

"Probe fired, Captain. Probe achieving stationary position," reported Worf again, the Klingon officer checking the control panels closely. "Initializing the probe... Probe now functional, sir."

"Excellent. Mr Worf, compute co-ordinates required for one complete orbit of the Batta V system... Ensign - a respectable distance, if you please."

The Ensign looked at Data who nodded briefly before entering the variables into his own program.

"Ready, sir."

"Then ahead, impulse speed - and let us hope the trail is not too cold," Picard observed to Commander Riker as he returned to his command chair. Riker nodded his agreement.

The doors to the hold audibly slid open and the by now characteristic firm footfalls of Lore came to a stop by Beverly's shoulder as she bent over the ailing form of the alien.

"You are not still bothering with that stupid thing, Doctor?" he observed in her ear as she prepared a hypo of stimulant from her med bag.

"Yes I am," replied Beverly, not deigning to remove her attention away from her patient for a moment. "You puzzle me, Lore."

"What puzzles you about me, Doctor?" asked Lore, hunkering down beside her, his attention on her ministrations to her patient as much as her own were.

"That a sentient being such as yourself - a reasoning, self-aware, intelligent - "

"Flattery will get you everywhere, Doctor," Lore interceded with a comic twitch of his eyebrows.

"- creature," Beverly continued grimly through clenched teeth, "takes such a precious gift as life so completely for granted. And what's more, your gift of life was granted to you in such exceptional circumstances - no random joining of genetic bits and pieces for Dr Soong's boys. Oh no, both of you planned right down to the last nanometre of optical fibre... Yet you, Lore,

have no comprehension, no appreciation of the gift that has been bestowed on you."

"Well, maybe if you had been knocked up out of a few hundred substandard parts, Doctor, you wouldn't be so fired up about this so-called gift. I have a healthy respect for a lot of things, Dr Crusher. Unfortunately, Human life does not rate very high on the list."

"No doubt the 411 colonists who died on Omicron Theta would agree with that statement," Crusher agreed somewhat drily.

"They didn't like me. They were scared of me, afraid, from the very first - a strange reaction from the people of a colony whose principal function was scientific research, eh Doctor?" He picked up a medical swab and picked at it morosely before throwing it back to the floor. "And the worst of it is that I tried really hard to impress them at the beginning with my knowledge, my ability. 800 quadrillion bits of memory, a computational speed of 60 trillion operations per second and not one person wanted to be my friend."

"It must have been quite terrifying," Beverly observed quietly, "for the colonists. What a creature to unleash amidst 411 common or garden, albeit mostly Starfleet grade, Human beings."

"Well, they thought so - they petitioned Soong to make a more fallible, less perfect replica of me. How ironic. Too good to be true, too clever to be acceptable." His tone was bitter. "I was never given a chance to live, to fit in... unlike dear Data."

"I'm about to argue a couple of points there." Beverly picked up the med-sensor and did another scan of the alien patient. "Data is no less infallible, or less perfect than you - he just handles life with more genuine humility. He knows he is not perfect, so he has something to strive for."

"Data only thinks he is not perfect because he will keep comparing himself to a Human standard - a quite useless exercise!" Lore retorted.

Beverly allowed herself a cutting look in Lore's direction before returning to her work. "You display a wonderful array of very negative characteristics, Lore - you lie, you display jealousy of Data that borders on insanity, you can be evil, you can be violent, unpredictable and downright nasty."

"Please, Doctor, feel free to speak your mind!" Lore snapped with sarcasm.

"What I am saying is that you show no positive characteristics at all." She took a deep breath and sat back on her heels, looking at Lore straight in his gold-toned eyes. "As my Grandmother used to say, don't pick the Psiweed until you know what it does."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Don't pick the Psiweed. Just that."

Lore just looked at her, and with a sigh, Beverly paused in her duties to explain. "I was brought up on the colony on Ovada III. When I was about nine, there was... an accident. Before that it had been a beautiful world, carpeted with all manner of vegetation, much to my Grandmother's delight, as avid an amateur horticulturalist as she was. The place was carpeted with the most curious purple plants, with flower heads like white puff balls the size of your fist, wherever you turned. Ovada FELT a good place to be... Then the accident. Within weeks, days almost, all those acres of 'weed' just vanished. Ovada III never felt like a place where you

wanted to stay again. Ever. I have never seen the like of that plant since, yet it was taken so much for granted when it was there."

"So what happened to it... and what in Hades is the point?"

"The Psiweed could affect Human senses in ways we could only ever guess at. God knows whether it was the accident or the violence and anguish generated by the Ovada III crisis that destroyed it. It was either driven out by greed, ambition, and avarice or by fear and suffering. Take your pick.

"My point is, that plant was like the positive emotions of love, friendship, compassion and the acquired traits like duty, honour and trust. Fragile, easily obscured and driven out by those more negative Human motivators... and take it from me, it appears to be a very Human set of motivators driving you, Lore."

Dr Crusher watched as the android blinked and then twitched as if something was in his eye.

This is it, she thought to herself. Another one of those mercurial mood swings.

His face was impassive, until he looked directly at her.

"Dear Doctor, I have read your play,
Which is a good one in its way,
Purges the eyes and moves the bowels,
And drenches handkerchiefs like towels," quipped Lore coldly. He stood abruptly, spinning on his heel and towering over the still crouching Doctor. "Byron - mad, bad and dangerous to know. Sums me up pretty well, don't you think, Doctor?"

"What's the matter, Lore? Is what I'm saying a little too close to the truth for comfort?" Beverly got to her feet and prepared to move away. "If you don't like what you are hearing, how about a nice easy solution. Send me back to my ship."

"Oh, but why the Enterprise? Why not hand you over to Romulan Information Agents... or sell you to Ferengi Slave Traders? Oh yes, Doctor, the Ferengi are well known to deal in 'livestock' when it is... profitable enough."

"By humiliating and frightening me, you are debasing and ultimately destroying yourself. You are establishing behaviour patterns now, that will only serve to isolate you further from -"

"But I am having SUCH fun, Doctor!"

"- sentient life forms from which you could potentially learn acceptable behaviour," she finally finished through gritted teeth. "You, Lore, display all the behavioural signs of a child with arrested emotional development. You are selfish, unable to share or co-operate with others -"

"Oh, I'll co-operate, Dr Crusher," Lore suddenly hissed, his face looking truly evil in the half light. Beverly stared at him, marvelling with some horror at the mood swings that seemed to fuel his instability. "What value do you think your Captain Picard would place on you, Dr Crusher, eh? What value are you to your precious Starfleet? You are a rare prize in your own little way - you see, I have been a good student, I have done my homework. How many years have you been in Starfleet? A few, is it not? There are more than a few members of the so-

called top brass on first name terms with you, are there not... Beverly?" Lore rolled her name off his tongue like a tasty insult. "How much would your little club pay to get you back?"

"I am sure you know nothing. That would all be highly classified information, Lore - access would be impossible."

"Oh, Doctor... what exactly do you think a being with a mind like mine does with all this spare time in deep space? Knit socks?"

"Captain Picard and Starfleet would never co-operate," Beverly replied emphatically, with a rapid change of tack. "It is a matter of strictest policy not to negotiate with those who seek to take Federation personnel as hostages to further their own ends -"

"Okay, Doctor. Okay, put the regulation book away." Lore raised his eyes in exasperation.

Beverly swallowed and looked at him with a determined lift to her chin, refusing to back down from the curious gold eyes.

"You are a great source of amusement," he chuckled and then sobered to deadly seriousness, "but you present me with a perfect conundrum of pay or play - trade you on or keep you here - with me. All mine, to enjoy as much as I want. Are you ready for some real fun, Bev?"

Oh my God, thought Beverly Crusher, just when you thought it could not get much worse, life has a habit of proving you wrong. But on seeing her expression, Lore laughed, and for once it was not the sarcastic hateful laugh she was so familiar with but one almost moved to genuine amusement.

"Of course, another lesson, Beverly, except this time in Human prudery? I would remind you that only a fool would attempt to coerce someone with knowledge of the location of their off switch AND alarm clock mechanism. I just wanted to see your face when I made the suggestion. Does the idea truly revolt you, Doctor?"

"No, not revolt," Beverly replied cautiously, the thought of Tasha Yar and Data's liason at the forefront of her mind. "I simply do not feel comfortable discussing the matter in my present situation, here. She looked at Lore steadily. "Thank you."

"As you wish," the android responded pleasantly, with that quixotic half smile that made it almost as if Data was standing right there, with her.

Geordi La Forge and Worf stood frowning over the bridge control panels, the read-outs from the ship's sensors being met with a combination of mutterings and growls truly unique to the bridge of the USS Enterprise. Riker glanced at the silent Captain as yet another set of rumblings came from the console behind their heads. The Captain lifted his chin from his hand and sat straight in his chair, tugging at his jacket.

"Anything to report, Mr Worf?"

"No, sir."

"Then stop that damned noise."

Riker glanced across to Troi, who was doing her level best not to catch his eye and thus be betrayed into showing amusement despite the tension. She had no wish to offend Worf, and Picard's unusual rebuke of the Klingon behind them was symptomatic of the strain they were all under. Perhaps that was why she was seized with such a sudden urge to giggle. She managed to turn her amusement into a cough, and suffice to say although the rumblings from behind their heads did not altogether cease, the volume reduced considerably.

"Coming up to half orbit mark of the Batta V system now, sir," reported the Ensign at conn.

"Stationary probe still reporting negative findings so far," reported Data. "Commencing scan of its third quadrant now."

The silence in between those brief reports really is unbearable, thought Troi as she sat in her bridge chair, gripping the seat with white knuckles. It was not until she released one of her hands that she realised she must have been tuning in to the anxiety of the bridge crew and translating it into muscular tension. Her hands were numb and stiff. She made a conscious decision to relax, taking a deep breath and sitting back in her chair, closing her eyes.

"Counselor, if you are tired, you are not needed on the bridge at the moment," came Picard's gentle tones.

Troi's eyes flew open. "No, sir. I'm fine, thank you. It is just so..."

"Nerve-racking," supplied Commander Riker with feeling.

"Yes, that's it," she agreed with a smile.

The Enterprise continued on its crawling elliptical circuit of Batta V, no one daring to breathe, almost, in case the noise that was made hid a sensor bleep.

Geordi watched the sensors with a worried frown, his face behind his VISOR set.

"I hope I calculated the calibrations correctly," he said to himself. "I am sure I did. I checked them twice... I'm sure I checked them at least twice."

He frowned again, and Worf caught his intense look. "You checked the calibrations three times... as did Data," he said, as quietly as a Klingon could, to the Chief Engineer.

"Thanks, Worf," said Geordi, and felt a lot better.

"Sir, sensors detect a positive reading from the stationary probe in its third quadrant search." Data's unruffled voice made the entire bridge crew jump in unison.

"Extrapolate sensor readings to our position and then concentrate high power scans on that area, Mr Data," snapped Picard, on his feet in a split second. Riker was up beside him, at his shoulder in an instant.

"It could be a false alarm, maybe," Riker cautioned.

"Ship's sensors confirm reading," Data reported. "It is an 85% positive identification."

"Or maybe not, Number One." Picard allowed himself a small smile. "For the moment we appear to have found ourselves a trail of breadcrumbs. Mr Data, leave the stationary probe

and continue to monitor its readings automatically - we will need a set of co-ordinates for our first leg."

"Indeed, Captain."

"We will have to obtain a second set of co-ordinates once we get to that point in space, as unfortunately light is not a static phenomena, so it will certainly have shifted from the original position of its distortion by the time our ship's sensors can detect it."

"A walking trail of breadcrumbs, sir?" Riker raised his eyebrows at the Captain, a smile doing its best to invade his face.

"Hmmm." The Captain regarded his second in command with a certain amount of humour, wondering if he could allow himself a less than serious reply to that, in such a public place as the bridge.

Data beat him to it. "Not precisely, Commander Riker. A more accurate term would maybe be a radiating trail of breadcrumbs, if I may appropriate your noun."

"Well, there you have it, Number One," Picard replied.

"Thank you, sir," Riker acknowledged.

"You are welcome, Commander," said Data.

It was the shrill whistle from the tricorder, the monotone alarm that never failed to strike fear into the very depths of Dr Crusher's innards whenever it sounded, that roused her. She was on her feet in an instant, having a moment before having been dozing against a crate, a hypo grasped like a weapon in one hand, her other hand plugging a refill into the syringe as she moved.

"Oh, no, you don't," she hissed as she pressed the hypo full of stimulant against the leathery brown epidermis. "No patient quits on me, buddy!"

As soon as the stimulant was dispersed, the tricorder readings showed a small improvement and then started plummeting downwards. Cursing, Crusher managed a med scan reading with one hand whilst refilling the hypo with the other, in a well practised manoeuvre perfected during her intern days, with a double dose.

It was a huge slug of compound to inject into any patient, but Beverly had realised it was make or break time, and the hiss of the hypo once more led to a small increase in the alien's life readings, but then, almost without warning, they plummeted again. Beverly was helpless.

"There's not a damn thing I can do," Beverly told herself as she watched the readings drop like a stone. "Not one damn thing!"

Finally, with a sound of almost the sweetest of sighs, the alien life form rolled slightly and then was still, its life signs falling to nil on Dr Crusher's makeshift medical equipment. Beverly raised her eyes from her patient at last, the fading life signs seeming to cruelly mimic her own fading hopes. There was nothing more she could do, she had done her best - but as much as she told herself she could do no more, it still hurt. It always hurt to lose a patient, particularly one who seemed so symbolic of her present predicament. Dr Crusher ran the

tricorder once again down the length of the scuffed, worn body - the results simply confirming what she already knew. The alien had finally lost its struggle for life. She had failed.

She sniffed. Beverly Crusher hated to cry. She felt it compromised her reserve. Deanna had no such conviction - she would shed tears openly if she felt moved to - but Beverly found it hard. Dr Crusher put a hand out and touched the rough epidermis with gentle fingers.

"Good try, bud," she whispered under her breath. The darkness in the hold seemed to creep around her and for the first time she felt truly alone. She shut her eyes hard, but it was not enough and two huge tears escaped and plopped messily onto the metal floor. She took a deep breath and scrubbed at her face with her hypo hand, eventually putting the tricorder down to rub at her face with the sleeve of her uniform.

"Doctor?" The cargo bay doors had opened.

Not now, please not now! Beverly cursed as she hurriedly sniffed back her accursed tears and tried to dry her eyes.

"Doctor?" Lore's voice came closer. Beverly stood up, standing before the alien's prone body, still scrubbing at her face,

"Doctor..." He was looking at her curiously, his head inclined to one side.

"Um... I am afraid," Beverly answered in a strained whisper, her hard won composure barely in place, "that my patient is dead."

"Oh?" Something else had piqued his curiosity, however - that much Crusher was aware of, though little did she know exactly what it was.

"You weep!" His exclamation of delight sickened the Doctor to her stomach, and made her turn violently away, but she was caught by two hands guided by effortless strength. "You have no concept of what it is like to ALMOST be able to shed tears of frustration and anger, Doctor. But you shed tears of grief... for a 'thing', an object you barely know and cannot, surely, care about." He shook his head and moved one of his hands to clasp her chin.

"I shed my tears for a wasted life, one I might well have been able to save," Dr Crusher retorted angrily, "but for you. Then again, I am well aware of your respect for life, Lore - Omicron Theta stands testament to that."

She pulled her chin free from his strong fingers and moved some distance away from the android.

"Respect has to be earned, Dr Beverly Crusher," Lore replied steadily, responding with one of his half smiles in the dim light of the hold, "but I must say that I am, in part, starting to realise why my brother has developed such an unceasing curiosity about you Human creatures. You are at times... most intriguing."

But the last syllable of the word was lost, as an eye-burning white light, so brilliant that Crusher felt it rather than saw it, exploded suddenly with the intensity of a supanova from every direction within the hold of Lore's ship.

"Sir, there is an energy build up," said Worf abruptly from his station. "Recommend - "

But the Klingon Security Officer never even got the chance to complete his sentence as in less than no time a bolt of pure white energy seared through the bridge at the speed of light, shaking the galaxy class ship right down to its hull panels.

The Enterprise's automatic alert systems were triggered the instant the shields were breached, and the navigation and communication panels blew in a shower of sparks. Red alert wailed into action, and bridge crew members scattered as one of the science stations erupted into a crackling display of blue light as if for good measure.

Then, as suddenly as it had come, it was gone and the bridge was left eerily still as the red alert continued to sound and the crew members warily started to pick themselves up off the floor.

"All stations report." Picard was the first to break the stillness, his tone supremely crisp and efficient as he took the emergency in his stride.

"Mr Data?"

Data was helping the Ensign he had knocked to the floor, on perceiving the conn about to blow, to his feet.

"Sir." Data speedily returned to his post at Ops. "All ship's stations are reporting some damage, but casualties appear to be restricted to equipment rather than personnel."

"Navigational status?"

The Ensign was still a little dazed, so it was the android officer who answered. "Unchanged, sir," Data assured him, checking the readings from his position.

"Mr La Forge?" Picard turned on his heel to regard Riker and La Forge brushing away damage to the communications console.

"Back up systems coming up now, sir," the Engineer reported.

"Mr Worf, how are they looking?"

"Initializing now... They appear to be functional." He paused briefly, before continuing, "Sir, they appear to be being blocked by some form of intense bombardment by erratic, anomalous signals."

"Identify?" Picard asked instantly. "Static or ordered in nature?"

"Sir, until further systems are back on line, I cannot say."

"Well, the instant you can identify them, Mr Worf, let me know," responded Picard dryly, as he watched the clearing up of his bridge with a proprietary air.

He walked to Ops, where Data was busy inputting information at a rapid rate, his face wearing an expression of intense puzzlement,

"Mr Data?" Picard enquired softly over the android's shoulder.

Data looked up briefly whilst continuing the input of variables. "Sir, I have successfully re-established contact with the stationary probe," he reported, "but the resonant light distortion

has disappeared from the sector we were last scanning, and can be located nowhere within that original vicinity.

"Our trail of 'breadcrumbs' appears to have gone, sir."

FOUR

Dr Crusher pulled herself out from where she had fallen between two sturdy crates, and started to clean herself off. All manner of dust and debris was starting to adhere to her Starfleet uniform, and Beverly did not need a mirror to tell her she was looking a state.

"Well, Lore, I'll say this - you sure do know how to show a girl a good time," she called out sarcastically, but got no response.

"Lore?"

She moved between the dust and debris for a little time before she found an outflung, distinctly pale hand protruding from beneath a shattered pile of boxes.

"Lore!" Quickly she pulled the shards of perspex and alloy away from the prone body as it lay face down upon the hold floor, arms outstretched, and dusted him off. Dr Crusher checked him over as best as she was able, her tricorder and med-scan lost somewhere in the rubble-strewn hold. *Not that*, the Doctor admitted wryly to herself, *the med-scan would do much to verify the well-being of someone of Lore's physiology.*

She then went for the activation switch on the android's left hand side, and paused.

Am I really about to do this? she asked herself, suddenly sitting back on her heels. *Should I really BE about to do this?*

Beverly Crusher got to her feet and picked her way around the scattered cargo to the door, which was still shut - and it remained shut as she punched the control panel. It was still obviously triggered by input other than manual. Quickly she returned to Lore's unconscious body and searched him for some form of proximity trigger or key that would initiate the door mechanism, but had no luck.

What a choice... or rather, there is small choice in rotten apples. Beverly sighed deeply, and took a deep breath before leaning forward and switching the android back on. Lore jerked to life, suddenly sitting bolt upright, his face in repose identical to Data's as he registered his surroundings and attitude. But at that point in his reinitialisation, the difference in the two androids' programming started to show, and suddenly his animation lit his face like an alter ego to the placid Data.

"What have you done to me?" he shouted angrily, trying to move onto his feet but having difficulty in achieving even that simple task.

"I haven't done anything to you," Beverly spat back, incensed. "In fact I am the one who just switched you back on!"

"You lie." As he managed to get the words out, he had also managed to sway groggily to his feet from underneath the remaining light debris. "You lie."

It was at this point that Beverly realised that Lore was holding his left arm uselessly

against his side as he regarded her furiously across the cargo bay hold, his back against one of the larger crates that were still standing.

"What is wrong with your arm?" Dr Crusher's professional concern instantly clicked into place. She stepped towards Lore without even thinking, stopping as he moved backwards.

"Nothing," he snarled. "There is nothing wrong with me at all, Crusher - so don't get any ideas."

Beverly took a step back, making a small moue of denial, and raising her hands in a disclaimer. "Hey, not me. I'm just a little concerned, that's all."

"Well, save your concern for someone who needs it... like yourself, Doctor," Lore responded coldly. Then he twitched as if his left hand side was going into spasm, and fell heavily to his knees.

"You're losing fluid," Beverly called out.

There was no response, and this gave her the confidence to move slowly closer to the android as he swayed on his hands and knees, gasping. "You mean I am leaking, Doctor?" Lore jibed breathlessly.

"Give my bedside manner a little credit," she replied as calmly as she could under the circumstances. "I haven't had a lot of Soong Class androids to practice on, but that does sound pretty unsympathetic."

"Sympathy, Doctor?" he gasped faintly.

"Self interest, Mr Lore. You are the pilot of this ship - or had you forgotten? I am expecting you to get me back home."

There was no response, but it was not as if Dr Crusher was looking for one, for she had just spotted the cause of Lore's disfunction. The android must have fallen backwards onto a shard of perspex during the violent light disturbance previously, and the sharp edged compound had pierced the android in the position of what in a Human would have been the left latissimus dorsi, and had embedded itself upwards to what would have been the lower trapezius.

"What's the verdict, Doctor?" came the faint query.

"I need to get you to whatever your version of Sickbay is, if you want serious help, Lore. There is a foot long shard of... something, that has pierced your upper left torso, and has damaged circuitry up to about 10cm under your skin - as far as I can see in this abominable light, anyway."

Dr Crusher reached out to peer underneath the flap of torn bioplast epidermis, but on Lore's sharp intake of breath and his wince at her investigation, she left well alone.

"But you're going to have to help me. I hope you are conversant with your own schematics and diagnostics, because you're going to have to tell me exactly what to do," Crusher warned him as she helped the android onto unsteady feet.

"I have full records of all my schematics," Lore replied arrogantly, if a little weakly, "and

am fully conversant with them all, thank you, Doctor. What worries me is, how do I know you are capable of carrying out what I tell you with the degree of accuracy necessary?"

They stumbled through the hold doors that now seemed, magically and almost obligingly, to slide back at their approach.

"Didn't anybody tell you... Well, I suppose they never really had the chance aboard the Enterprise, did they? I reassembled you after you were found on Omicron Theta," Beverly answered somewhat breathlessly, as an incapacitated android was no lightweight for someone of her willowy frame.

"I had Data to examine you, and Chief Argyll to advise and guide me, but I was the one who executed the fine assembly. It will be interesting to see if you've been looking after my handiwork."

Lore was strangely quiet at this revelation. He brought them to a stop and then said to her coldly, "If that is the case, Dr Crusher, then how can I possibly trust you not to make a more deliberate mistake, now you have managed to engineer your way out of your prison?"

Picard stood near the helm of his ship, looking out at the dark expanse of space before him, standing quite relaxed - at odds with the attitude of the crew around him.

"Mr Data?"

"I have commenced search pattern once more using the stationary probe, sir... but so far, the results are negative."

"And the ship?"

"Essential backup systems have been initialised, sir, where appropriate. Repairs are underway."

"Mr Worf?"

"We still have no explanation for the static bombardment of the communication equipment, sir, although the nature of the static is changing over time. It could be that it is some kind of distortion following in the wake of the energy wave that hit the Enterprise."

"Is there any way of filtering out the static to allow us to carry out normal subspace communication, Lieutenant?" Riker turned in his seat to look at the Klingon.

"Negative, sir." Worf growled.

"So we are effectively isolated from communication with any outside agency?" Picard raised his eyebrows and glanced at his First Officer.

"Convenient, sir," Riker observed grimly.

"Indeed, Number One," answered his Captain. "Fortunate the link to the probe was established before that, whatever it was, struck us."

"Yes, Captain, it does seem a little unusual, that the link should have remained

unscathed."

"The link to the probe is intact and still fully functional, sir," put in Data. "There was no problem in re-establishing contact with the probe after the initial wave of energy, or indeed using the sensors, both of which should also be subject to sub-space anomalies in a similar way to the communication systems."

"A little unusual for random sub-space static," Riker commented. "In fact almost calculated, wouldn't you say?"

"Are you suggesting that some type of intelligence is jamming messages going in... and out, Commander?" asked La Forge, puzzled. "Why both ways, when one would be sufficient?"

"Continue analysis, Mr La Forge, Mr Worf," Picard indicated with a nod of his head. "Mr Data, arrange a relief at Ops. I think Geordi and Worf may be able to use your input in the next round of research."

At this point, Counselor Troi emerged from the turbo lift onto the bridge. She walked confidently down the ramp onto the main bridge area, and then paused, shook her head, and then paused again.

"Curious," she muttered, before sitting in her chair to the left of command.

"Counselor? I trust sickbay has everything in hand?" Picard asked as he sat down beside her.

"Um... Yes, it appears to be mainly knocks, cuts, bruises and scrapes." She responded absently, her gaze drawn to the main viewscreen and the deep space it displayed beyond. Her brow became more furrowed with the passing moments.

"Do you think the intention is hostile, sir?" Commander Riker asked the Captain. "A trap, maybe, by something like the Crystal Entity?"

"No!"

Both men turned to regard Troi with some surprise as she sat bolt upright in her chair, her eyes wide.

"No... not hostility. Puzzlement - I sense intense puzzlement. Why haven't we responded? Captain, there is something out there." Counselor Troi shut her eyes and held her temples in an attempt to focus.

"Is it the Crystal Entity, or something similar?" Picard asked quickly. "How is expecting us to respond? With force?"

"No... It is too disparate to be a single entity," Troi discounted, "but it is definitely trying to contact us. It is not expecting force... but it IS expecting some type of attempt at communication Captain."

Dr Beverly Crusher pinched the bioplast epidermis between finger and thumb and applied the epidermal suture to the wound, but the skin was too taut to meet.

"This is ridiculous!" she snapped, banging the suture down on the table. "It's bad enough that I'm having to conduct this without the appropriate equipment, such as a laser scalpel, but, what's more, if you don't put that phaser down, NOW, and lie on your front, I cannot do any more!"

Dr Crusher stared furiously at the back of Lore's head as he sat upon the examination bed within what appeared to be some form of laboratory-cum-sickbay aboard the strange vessel. He held her away team phaser in his right hand, pointing it at her from over his left shoulder in case she decided to try anything. The resulting torque on his back epidermal tissue meant any attempt at sealing the wound failed - and Beverly had had enough.

"You either put that phaser down now, or I am going to leave you with a hole measurable in light years in your back, Lore. And I mean NOW. All the work I've done so far is otherwise going to be wasted."

With deliberate noise, she started to remove the surgical gloves she had donned in order not to allow dust or tissue to contaminate delicate circuitry *as positive gravity conditions were obviously not an option aboard this primitive ship*, Beverly reflected with some disgust.

"And why exactly should I trust you, Doctor?" Lore snapped, much more lively now that the nutrient solution required by his organic components had been replaced by a hastily improvised drip feeding through his 'skin' at the neck. "You have made your feelings about me quite clear."

"Think of it like this, Lore. True, you are not a particularly nice guy. But I am not helping you because I think you are a particularly wonderful person or genuine humanitarian. I am helping you because you are Data's brother and Data is my friend. I think Data does at least care what happens to you, because you are family. If I did not help you now I would not be able to look Data straight in the eye ever again. And that would hurt me." She eyed her patient with an act of firm assurance. "That is, of course, WHEN I get back on the Enterprise."

Slowly, reluctantly, the phaser was lowered. "But I am warning you, my reflexes are still many factors faster than your puny Human ones, Doctor Crusher, so one false move and I will fry you." His voice was a sibilant hiss.

"Oh well, Lore, then I will not even bother with the 'this won't hurt a bit' and I'll get straight on to, 'this will hurt you more than it will hurt me.'" Beverly continued under her breath, *I hope*. She wearily picked up the suture equipment, and deftly started to reseal the skin neatly, now she had the required slack to allow the two edges to bond. The tense working conditions and the fact she had been concentrating on unfamiliar work for almost two hours at phaser point were starting to take their toll. Sweat had been beading her brow for the past 30 minutes or more, but now it was starting to collect and run into her eyes at last. Her nerves felt as if they were at breaking point. She had resorted to caustic humour as a way of helping her tense nerves and diffusing Lore's rather volcanic mood swings, but her whole adventure was starting to take a serious, if untimely, toll.

"Try that left hand before I finish up."

"Making sure of your work, Doctor?"

"I am a professional, Lore. If I set out to do something, I do it well and to the best of my ability - whatever the cost in time and... the consequences," Beverly snapped back in reply.

Unfortunately, just as she reapplied the suture to the android's shoulder blade after that

test, he winced or twitched, Beverly was unsure exactly what. What she was sure of however was that his elbow jerked back and knocked the suturing tool from her tired cramped fingers, and onto the floor.

"Clumsy, Doctor. Where is the consummate professional now?"

Beverly dropped wearily onto one knee to retrieve the piece of surgical equipment from the floor. She blinked faintly, and put one hand onto the examination bed to pull herself back up.

It was at that moment that Dr Beverly Crusher had had enough. She had had enough of the bullying, the shouting, the mental abuse, the cruelty of being held captive and of almost feeling a party to it. The easiest way to survive so far had seemed to be to not rock the boat and anger Lore too much, but to still make her opinions clear so she did not appear weak.

The stress of the past 36 hours had been monumental; she had had little sleep, no food, had suffered concussion not once, but possibly twice (Crusher had had no chance to check as the tricorder and med-scan still lay buried under debris from the blast in the hold), and she felt she had now hit the limit for being able to take one iota more. However much one was aware of the effects of being taken captive, and how it could make one function with complicity and dependency, almost trusting of one's captors, Beverly knew she had to snap out of it. She had to escape as it was becoming more obvious that Lore was not about to let her go.

As she straightened up, she saw Lore's naked back and her almost fully completed closing of the wound. Another few moments and she would be finished up, and probably frogmarched back into that dark hold.

Beverly did not need to think much beyond that event, as without further ado she lunged for the off switch recessed into his left side. Doctor Crusher's long nimble fingers were normally quick and accurate, but now they were also aching after two hours of intense physical work that had required spot on control. As a result, Beverly fumbled the off switch and hit the timer instead.

With reflexes so fast that Dr Crusher could never even honestly say that she had seen him move, Lore spun round on the examination table and caught her wrists in a punishing grip that made her give an involuntary gasp of genuine pain. "That hurts, Lore. You are hurting me."

"Nice try, Doctor... nice try," Lore mocked almost gleefully. "So I was right, never trust a Human! That act was maybe a little ambitious for a Human who has been functioning at full capacity, albeit for a mere two hours or so."

"I haven't finished sealing the wound yet," Beverly snapped.

"And turn my back on you again?" Lore replied with mock incredulity. "I do not think so, Doctor. I think I can more than adequately complete my repair process from this point. No, I don't think I will try and match your own track record of mistakes, Dr Crusher."

"Mistakes?" Beverly shook her head, aghast. "Mistakes? But I haven't made any mistakes."

"You, Dr Beverly Crusher, have made at least two mistakes." Lore held her struggling wrists with consummate ease as he grinned into her face, "And fascinating ones at that. The first was to reactivate me after that incident in the hold. The second was to show me how

valuable you could be to me. Big mistakes, Dr Crusher, particularly, I think, the second one. Because to give up, or lose something, that makes you go... Well, it is rather like violating the Packled Prime Directive!"

Lore roared with laughter at his own joke before slowly releasing Doctor Crusher's wrists, leaving her glaring at him with pure hatred in her face, nursing her bruises, the welts of which were already starting to show.

"I demand you release me," she spat.

"Oh, Doctor! I think you and I could be a great team. And I would have the ultimate revenge on dear brother and your troublesome little son. Come on, Bev - you'll have a great time, no stuffy old Captain Picard or dumb old Riker round to spoil the fun... The whole universe at your feet, to do with as you please."

"You are completely mad!" Beverly responded a little more calmly, although her overwrought nerves were on overload.

"I am. Completely and totally, Doctor. And guess what." A strong finger caught her chin and turned her face to look at him. "Only you can save me."

Data swung round in his chair to enter information into the second console as Worf and La Forge watched his station with great interest.

"I can see it now, Data - and each time the message is sent, the frequency peaks seemed to become more regular," observed La Forge. "Almost as if the pattern of static is getting more simple in composition."

"If this is some THING trying to contact us, it would appear to be modifying its signal," contributed Worf.

"Indeed," Data agreed. "It would appear to be interpreting our failure to respond as an indication that we cannot understand."

"An interesting premise - interpreting it as not being able to understand as opposed to us not wanting to reply," Geordi mused, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "Whatever is out there sure must be confident that we are going to want to give it an answer."

"Hm," replied Data, as he did when he had a particularly interesting and satisfying morsel to absorb.

"I suggest," Geordi started, sitting at the science station adjacent to Data, "that we start clearing up these signals a little and then start running them continuously through the universal translator as we receive them."

"That appears a logical approach," Data agreed, "as the actual signal is somewhat obscured by the background noise in this instance - or so it appears."

"The universal translator will attempt to decode all incoming frequencies," Worf pointed out. "How can you be sure we will be filtering out the incorrect portion?"

"We can't be," Geordi admitted ruefully, "but it's got to be worth our best shot."

Worf allowed himself a low growl. *Warriors*, he told himself, *did NOT like wasting time on gambles*. "Then, if I may suggest, could we not split the signal and run the rejected input through the universal translator also," he rumbled, "just in case."

"That would indeed be possible, Geordi," agreed Data, directing a look at the Chief Engineer, "but it would also slow processing."

"Well, I'll take that gamble," replied La Forge. "Let's do it." He turned to Worf, only to discover the Klingon gone, stalking off to his own duty station in disgust.

"What did I say?" Geordi looked at Data.

Data looked back, and achieved his best approximation of a bewildered shrug to date.

Meanwhile Counselor Troi was prowling the bridge. It was incredibly frustrating to be only half Betazoid at times like this - being able to sense an intelligence trying to communicate and not being able to do one thing apart from just that. Unable to discern the message, unable to transmit one of her own, and meanwhile Beverly was still out there, very possibly in danger. Rarely did Counselor Troi wish she was more like her full Betazoid mother... but at moments like these...

"Is there anything?" she asked Will Riker as she went to stand next to him at the Ops position, where he was observing data incoming from the probe.

He shook his head. "No, not yet."

"Captain - incoming message appears to be decoding," Worf called out from his position at Communications where he had been monitoring output at his recently repaired station.

"Message, Mr Worf." Picard stood, straightening his uniform jacket as he did so. His chin up, his jaw clenched, he turned to regard his Klingon Chief of Security,

"The message says 'Stand by... for the... release of... carbon based... biped being... gender female. End of message.' That completes the message, sir," The Klingon reported. "The communication goes on to repeat the same message over and over again."

"Are we able to transmit in the same code?" asked Picard quickly.

"Yes, Captain," replied Data promptly, with the certainty of facts that only he could infuse into his voice. "The universal translator, having now recognised the code, should be able to regenerate code as we require it."

"Then transmit an affirmative response, same code, Mr Data," Picard returned in clipped tones.

"Such as, sir?" Data inquired hesitantly

"Such as 'ready' or 'standing by' should do, Data," Captain Picard responded speedily as if prepared for his third in command's question.

"Message transmitted, sir." Data reported.

"Message received and understood," murmured Counselor Troi, in a low voice, at the

Captain and Commander Riker's side.

Beverly Crusher was aware of a duality of moment, as for one instant she was staring into Lore's curiously gold-flecked eyes, and the next was encompassed in a cocoon of white light, so intense it was almost as if she could feel it between her fingers, in her ears, in her eyes and on her skin. The light force seemed to have no concept of gravity or equilibrium as she was tumbled through a maelstrom of seconds before she found herself sitting, sprawled somewhat inelegantly, on the floor of the main bridge of the USS Enterprise.

Dr Crusher stared down at her horrendously dirty and dishevelled state, intensified by the contrast with the immaculate floor of the Enterprise. Disorientated and disbelieving, she looked up to see the no less immaculate Jean-Luc Picard bearing down on her.

"Beverly! Are you all right?" His face bore a look of intense concern and control, but Beverly could see his hazel eyes alight with relief and humour at the manner of her present reappearance. "We have been somewhat anxious about your whereabouts, Doctor," he commented dryly.

"Not half as anxious as I've been," Beverly responded with some feeling, "believe me!" With grim determination she scrambled to her feet. Once standing, she went to lean against the Ops console, but found her arm speedily and ably supported by the quiet strength of Captain Picard as he hailed Sickbay.

"Picard to Selaar. Sickbay, could you send a medical team to the bridge please."

"I will not be stretchered off the bridge to my own Sickbay, Captain," Dr Crusher objected stiffly, as Dr Selaar acknowledged the request.

"Your adventure appears to have affected your memory somewhat, Dr Crusher," the Captain replied crisply. "As you should know, vanity has no place aboard my ship."

Dr Crusher regarded him with exasperation, but Picard simply allowed himself a small smile. "Welcome back, Dr Crusher," he said.

Commander Riker and Troi stepped forward to relieve the Captain of his charge, relief evident in both their faces,

"Beverly, it is so good to see you!" Troi patted her friend's shoulder whilst holding on to her arm to give support. "But I have just got to ask you - who or what was it that brought you back to us?"

"Captain, message coming in, sir," Data alerted his superior Officer. "It simply says, 'Gratitude to carbon based life form Crusher' and that is all. End of message."

"Who or what is... *was* it?" Picard asked, intrigued. Riker looked at Beverly, an expectant smile on his face,

"If it is what I think it was, then it could be one of the more grateful and rewarding patients of my career," Beverly managed, looking up as the medical team entered the bridge from the turbolift.

Data had moved to stand quietly by the Doctor at the front of the bridge, and as the sickbay attendants prepared the stretcher, he asked, "Doctor... was it Lore?"

"Yes, Data, it most definitely was Lore," Beverly answered emphatically, "and he was as charming as ever!"

"If that is the case, I feel, Dr Crusher, that I should apologise for my brother's aberrant behaviour..."

"Data, you don't have to apologise for anything," Beverly admonished him gently.

"But Doctor, the responsibility - " Data started in his quiet and even tone.

"Data, don't worry," Beverly insisted as one of the attendants placed her, with the help of the Counselor, onto the stretcher. "With the radiation readings on Batta V being at the level they were, it is entirely possible that your brother Lore actually saved my life. But don't ever tell him that - I think it could possibly spoil the next millenia of his existence."

She leaned back on the stretcher and shut her eyes, her face appearing almost grey with fatigue and strain.

Data opened his mouth as if to say something in reply to the Doctor, but was silenced by a gentle grip on his arm.

"Get the Doctor to Sickbay," directed the Captain gently. He watched the med team manoeuvre their charge into the turbolift before raising his voice marginally to state, "And Doctor - we will expect your full report at the earliest opportunity, if you please."

The response was a weak wave before the turbolift doors hissed shut.

"We can ask our questions then. In the meantime, all stations report, please," Picard requested as he returned to his command chair, releasing Data's arm so that he could return to Ops.

"All communications channels now clear, sir," Worf reported.

"Ship's status, repairs almost complete, status ready," Data reported as he sat at Ops.

"Course, Number One?" Picard turned to his First Officer.

"The next part of our schedule was to take in a visit to the Dado Nebula," answered Commander Riker promptly, well aware of his Captain's fascination for exotic stars. "Potentially a very interesting trip, sir."

"Agreed, Number One. Ensign?"

"Co-ordinates already laid in, Captain."

"Then... engage."

Chief Medical Officer Beverly Crusher, Personal Log, Stardate 50305.6: Life goes on aboard the Enterprise as if I had never been away on 'adventures' of

my own. Dr Selaar, supremely efficient as ever, had the whole of Sickbay running at a very Vulcan peak of efficiency - as if I was not even needed round here.

My first real task upon my return was to contact Wesley and assure him I was OK; however most of my thunder had been stolen as Captain Picard had already spoken to him whilst I was confined to Sickbay. Wesley, with all the spirit of youth, considered it a great adventure and appeared to consider it something of a side issue that I actually emerged from the whole ordeal unscathed. Then I was treated to a 15 minute lecture on the vagaries of the Dado Nebula, which the Enterprise has been studying for the past week or so, which was fine, only I had managed to avoid astronomical discussion of any sort up until that point despite being aboard a vessel in the midst of such an apparently exciting celestial topic. Still, it was good to hear his voice and see his face; each time I see him, it reminds me of how much less a boy he is, and how much more a man - but still my little baby... I can hear his voice now if he ever accesses this, and I quote, 'Aw, Mom - don't'.

The nightmares have stopped, or at least become less frequent. I never considered myself invulnerable, but the stress of those few days had a more severe impact than I had anticipated. But I survived - that has got to count for something, even if I did have to be restricted to Sickbay for two days upon my return. It would have been three, but after 48 hours, the medical staff was begging for my release. Who said Doctors make the worst patients? The rest of the crew has been wonderful... if a little unnerving!

Deanna has fussed over me until I threatened to do her actual bodily harm if she does not behave more like herself and less like her mother for just five minutes. She has helped immeasurably with sorting out the nightmares and associated stress of returning to shipboard life, and has also helped me with Data.

Data has apologised to me for my adventure several times - in fact I have my suspicions he will not be satisfied until he has exhausted the Enterprise's entire data banks on obsequious behaviour and ways to make amends. In part, I feel that he does feel genuine responsibility for his brother's role in my detention, but it almost certainly has gone past the point of being purely that. I am now Data's latest and most fascinating project in becoming more Human - and in my escapades, where both Batta V and Lore's carelessness failed in my demise, Data will surely succeed. It is enough to make a saint scream - but I will bear it, because it is Data, and because it reminds me of the natural balance the Universe shows in all things.

Will Riker has been a tonic. He comes along, seemingly out of nowhere, for his little chats, invariably weighed down with gifts of food and flowers; or with Deanna, to cheer an afternoon that would otherwise have me climbing the walls of my cabin, as I have been banned from duty until my psych tests are complete.

Worf sought me out to make the most PAINFUL apology it has ever been my fate to witness, for he had obviously been rather hard on himself, as Head of Security, for ever letting me go off to search that quadrant on my own. If the Klingons truly do equate greatness with the ability to carry out one's duty and withstand great discomfort, Worf emerged from that particular interview

with honours. I did my best to accept such an offering with all the grace and condescension such a nobly executed feat required. My natural response was to point out that it was I who was far more responsible than he for the events on Batta V, and the ensuing mishap that led to me being discovered by Lore, but I had no wish to insult him by rejecting so handsome and sincere an apology - so I did my duty as best I could by accepting it. I will simply bide my time until I can have a proper word with him about the affair.

On the subject of duty, Jean-Luc has visited me punctiliously, three times a day, since I was instructed to step down from duty until the end of those dratted tests. He arrives, and for the duration of the interview (for I will not call it a social call however well dressed it is in urbane small talk) he observes my every move with the sharpness of a patriarchal hawk watching a particularly interesting specimen of prey. If I dare yawn, blink, twitch, sneeze or sigh at an inappropriate moment, I feel I am in danger of delaying my return to full functioning CMO by days, even weeks, past the final psych tests. Not a trick passes him by, much less tiredness around the eyes from lack of sleep, or the fact that one has, maybe, not regained all the weight one had prior to her unscheduled departure from his ship. How someone has the memory capacity for such trivia, in addition to those essential thousand and one things that a Starship Captain must remember, beats the hell out of me. I have tried reminding Jean-Luc that I am probably the best judge of when I am ready to return to my medical duties, and had he not better concentrate on running his ship. All I get is one of those twinkling smiles that are so rarely aired; no answer, mind you, just that smile. It's as if nearly twenty years had never passed us by.

Anyone with any interest in xenobiology at all aboard the Enterprise (too many to count, as someone pointed out to me - would anyone BE aboard the Enterprise if they did NOT have an interest in alien life forms!) appears fascinated by my encounter aboard Lore's ship. I am still working on my report, and nobody dare ask me outright (Jean-Luc Picard's omnipotent directives strike again) about the strange life form I encountered there.

In retrospect, the being must have chosen the Batta V Colony planet as a safe haven to enter the cocoon stage of some form of metamorphosis. Having never seen the original 'larva' of this creature, I can only assume that the bright white light force experienced, both by myself aboard the Packled ship, and by the Enterprise, was some manifestation of the imago stage of this creature. At the moment, it is all simply guesswork on my part, but I do know the tricorder readings of the creature are sorely missed by those eager enough to continue study. My role in 'saving' the creature can only have been in repairing its cocoon structure, and thus allowing it to go on to complete its development. I wonder what it looked like initially? I will never know now; I suppose it will always be a mystery.

Another great mystery is the whereabouts of Lore, who appears to have vanished into deepest space, much to the disappointment of Worf, who was warming up for an arrest. Troi is convinced I must be harbouring deep-set resentment towards him, and am denying it to myself and her. In truth it has been very difficult to come to terms with what I do feel about my ordeal. I was angry at my confinement, but if I had remained on Batta V I would have been dead by now. Lore scared the living daylights out of me... but I think, I *hope* that I managed in part to scare him a little too, for nobody likes to

consider themselves vulnerable. Which makes it a little more of an even exchange, I think. He saved my life, not once, but twice - Lore was, is, an android; he didn't NEED life support to be restored when his shield systems started draining power due to the Batta V solar dust. He could have survived adequately without it. He did not have to return me to his ship; he could have left me to die on Batta V.

I have come to believe Lore is the worst kind of lost soul, arrested at the stage of being a wild, passionate,spoiled child with no calling or code to guide him. How do you expect someone to display trust, friendship, honour and compassion if all they have ever known, or can relate to, are the bad - lies, blackmail, greed and revenge? I don't know, maybe if I had not tried to be so smart, had tried to reason with him rather than trick him, he could have been persuaded to return to the Enterprise. But to what? To be disassembled to see 'what went wrong' by the Daystrom institute?

I do feel pity for him, despite all that he has done, the Human life he has betrayed - which I can only censure as both physician and humanitarian; but to be so intelligent, and to have been condemned to roam the galaxy in isolation, in exile... For all that he despises Human life so much, its study has much to offer him...

Beverly Crusher paused in her personal log for a brief moment, to stare out at the stars. She had been banished from Sickbay to prevent her from working, so she had resorted to working in the Medical Lab. If this was the closest she could get to working in her medical facility, so be it, she had thought.

As she went to return to her log, she heard a very faint chiming noise, like the tinkling of tiny shards of glass, from within Sickbay. Dr Crusher knew the portion of Sickbay near the Med Lab to be empty of personnel for the present, as a recent visit to a Starbase facility had meant more serious cases had been transferred.

Beverly rose from her chair and walked cautiously out into Sick Bay proper. "Is there anyone there?" she asked in a loud, clear voice. There was no sound, but Beverly was convinced of what she had heard from within this area. "Come on - I know you are there," Beverly tried again. "It's no good hiding."

And then Dr Beverly Crusher saw it, lying on the central examination bed like a prize exhibit. A curious purple-stemmed bloom with asymmetric leaves shaped like earth clover in the same bluish pigment as the main support. A dewy sap gave it a bejewelled appearance. But most striking of all was the flower's head, for it was like a white puff ball... as big as a human fist.

